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LOUIS VUITTON

OMEGA
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MASTER CHRONOMETER
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SPEEDMASTER '57
Co-Axial Master Chronometer

A CLASSIC ICON RETURNS

With its unique Broad Arrow hands and tachymeter scale on the bezel, the Speedmaster '57 is emblematic of the first, revolutionary Speedmaster that was launched in 1957. For the latest update, OMEGA has lifted the vintage spirit to another level, with slimmer styling, extraordinary colour, and a Co-Axial Master Chronometer engine that takes precision to the next gear. This enduring watch is a front seat companion for George Clooney, and represents the original, timeless look of the Speedmaster line.

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On the Covers

Photograph by Adrienne Raquel. Styled by Mobolaji Dawodu. Coat, $995, by **Adrienne Landau.** Turtleneck, $1,495, by **Brioni.** Pants, $670, by **Etro.** Sunglasses, $650, by **Gucci.**

Photograph by Daniel Jackson. Styled by Mobolaji Dawodu. Coat, $12,200, and turtleneck, $1,950, by **Prada.** His own hat by **One Fresh Hat.** Jewelry, his own.

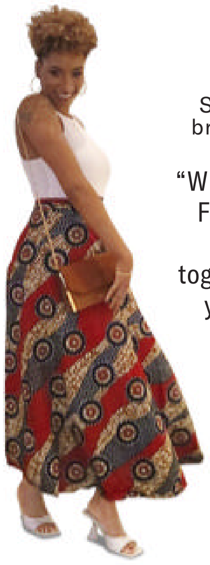
Photograph by Danielle Levitt. Styled by Mobolaji Dawodu. Coat, $8,995, shirt, $450, and tie, $235, by **Ralph Lauren Purple Label.** Watch, $11,800, by **Omega.** Bracelet and ring, his own.

Office Grails

→

BRAUNA MARKS
Associate visuals editor, GQ US

"Don't let the handmade skirt fool you—I'm very much that person who heckles referees at a sporting event."



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JASON FITTER
Senior director, brand marketing, GQ US

"With the last name Fitter, one must be able to put together an elegant yet simple fit."

→

CHARLIE JOHNSON
Contributing fashion assistant, GQ US

"I like wearing things that remind me of vacation."

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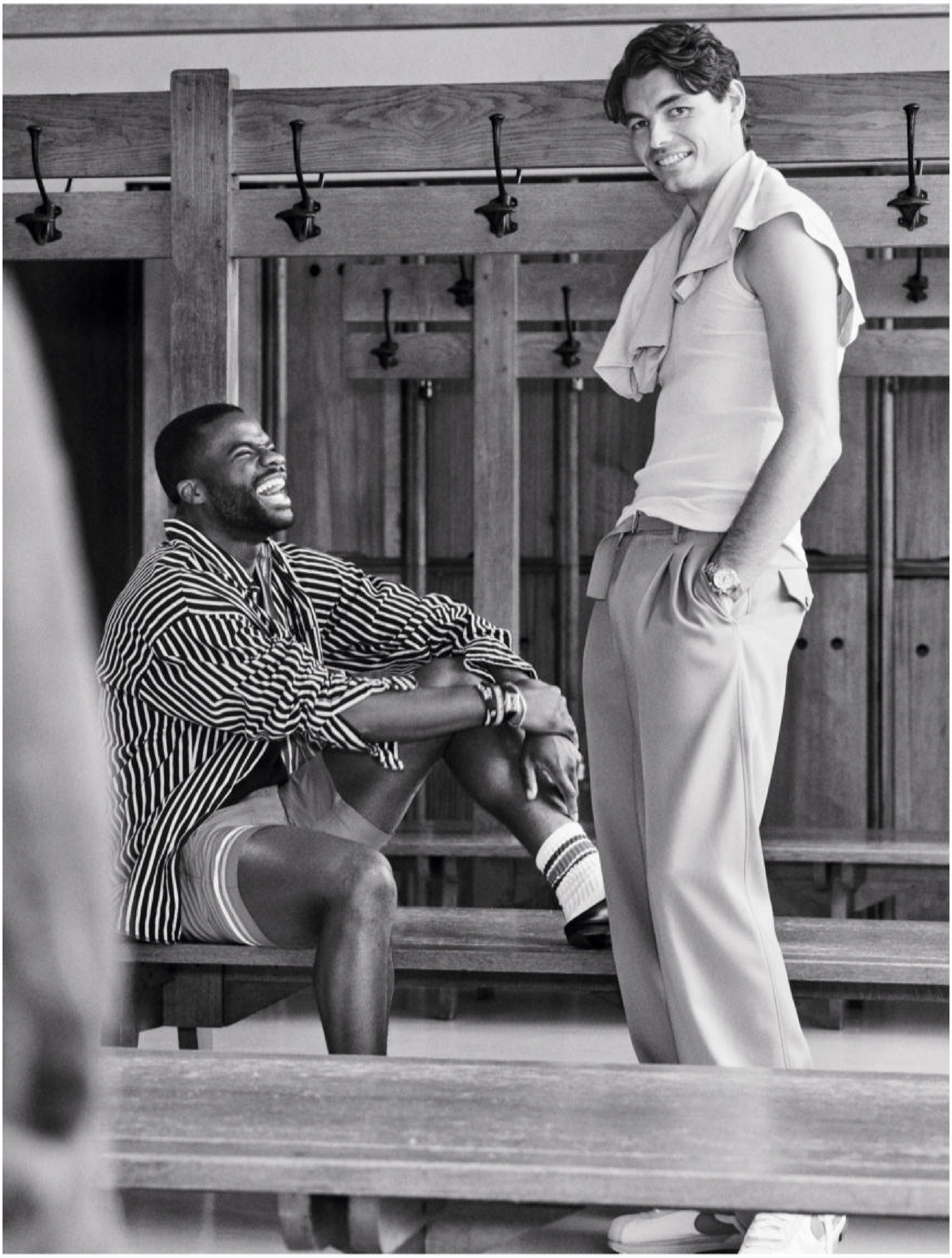

For our story on Frances Tiafoe, Taylor Fritz, and the other new superstars of men's tennis, see page 64.

On TIAFOE: Vintage shirt by **Wrangler.** Tank top, price upon request, by **Bottega Veneta.** Shorts, $630, by **Brunello Cucinelli.** Shoes, $595, by **Dries Van Noten.** Stylist's own socks by **Uniqlo.** Watch, $12,800, by **Cartier.** Jewelry, his own. **On FRITZ:** T-shirt (worn over shoulders) and watch, his own. Tank top, price upon request, by **Bottega Veneta.** Pants, $711, by **Lanvin.** Sneakers, $180, by **Nike x Sacai.**

STYLIST, JAY MASSACRET.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ILYA LIPKIN**

GQ3

GQ now is operating in Web3.
Join the conversation on Discord.

Finally, a Hall of Fame With Swagger

IN 1992, when Deion Sanders suited up for both the Falcons and the Braves on the same day, taking two limos, two helicopters, and a private jet between Miami and Pittsburgh to make it all happen, I was an 11-year-old Little Leaguer living in Atlanta, Georgia.

Obviously, Neon Deion was a superhero.

The way he could take over a game from the *cornerback* position (with a few punt returns thrown in) defied the fundamental logic and spatial layout of the game of football.

Equally inspired was the way he freaked his uniform, from the creative innovation of his sweatband placement, to the towel he dangled from the front of his belt, to the bandana that would remain his signature between the hash marks.

Meanwhile on the baseball diamond, he weaponized his blazing speed to turn singles into doubles and doubles into triples—his gold chain bobbing out of his jersey as he transformed himself into a Road Runner–like blur. To me, the act was no less immortal.

Yet even in his two-sport heyday, Prime Time never made it to the prime real estate of the cover of *GQ*.

Maybe Sanders—a guy who hobnobbed on the sidelines with MC Hammer in the "2 Legit 2 Quit" era of the Falcons, and famously drew a dollar sign in the dirt of the batter's box—was just way too far ahead of his time culturally.

All I can say is that the current editorial team wasn't going to let the omission slide. Deion Sanders—one of humankind's most swaggerific sportsmen—being *forever* overlooked by *GQ*? No way.

Which is why I'm thrilled to announce a major new program that enables us to rectify the historical head-scratchers of the past and bring the cultural planets back into their rightful alignment: The GQ Sports Style Hall of Fame.

We are kicking off our new Style Hall with three covers that feature a trio of the coolest athletes of all time: Allen Iverson, Derek Jeter, and the man we now know as Coach Prime.

To further mark the moment, we are also throwing a big ol' event on Saturday, February 11 (yep, that's the day before the Super Bowl), in Scottsdale, Arizona, where we'll be interviewing all three cover stars in person onstage—and inducting them into our new Style Hall of Fame. Buy yourself a ticket and you can be there to celebrate with us too.

This issue also marks Allen Iverson's overdue debut on the cover of *GQ*. Incredible, given what we now take for granted: that A.I. brought *culture itself* to the forefront of the NBA, simply through his style. He went chain for chain with Puff and Biggie. He invented the tunnel fit. He provoked the infamous NBA dress code. And he inspired a generation of young men to emulate his every look and move—on and off the court.

What can we say: When we get a chance to make it right, we make it *all the way right*. Mr. Iverson, it is an honor to give you the cover you have long deserved.

Speaking of deserving, Derek Jeter had *GQ* covers in 1998, 2000, and 2011. Which makes sense given that Jeter's embodiment of turn-of-the-century NYC adhered to the ideals of the magazine in those eras. The playboy. The professional. The winner. Still: Once every decade for four decades puts him in the rare company of our Damons and Denzels. That's Jeter to a tee—a suave Hollywood megastar who just happened to wear pinstripes.

In the coming months and years, we will continue to add new inductees into the SHOF until we have created the sexiest and most coveted Hall of Fame on the planet.

As we begin to expand the Hall, I know one person who will be keeping tabs.

In a video posted to his own IG last year, Coach Prime lamented the standards of the Pro Football Hall of Fame: "The Hall of Fame ain't the Hall of Fame no more," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "It's people that changed the game. That's what the Hall of Fame is, a game changer. *A game changer.* Not 'I played good, I had a good little run, I gave you three or four good years.' No, dog. *Game changers.* Put my head where my head supposed to be."

This time around, Coach, mark my words. Everything is in its rightful place.

I hope to see you all at the event in Arizona.

Will Welch

GLOBAL EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ANDREAS LASZLO KONRATH**

WILL WELCH: GROOMING, DANNY LARIVIERE FOR BARBA GROOMING BOUTIQUE. ALLEN IVERSON: ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES. DEION SANDERS: DWIGHT ROSS JR./ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION/AP. DEREK JETER: JAMES DEVANEY/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES.

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Why are we afraid of therapy? It's complicated.

Here's some advice from a licensed therapist.

Haesue Jo, LMFT

Whether you're experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression, feeling burned out at work, or navigating relationship challenges, therapy can be an effective tool for building resilience and improving your mental health. But finding therapy that works for your schedule, budget, and goals can be challenging. Here are some pointers to make therapy less daunting, and help you get the care you're looking for:

1. Understand that therapy can be for anyone. Therapy isn't only for people who have been diagnosed with a severe mental health issue. Mental health is for everyone. Therapy can be beneficial even if you just need someone to talk to.

2. Be kind to yourself — seeking therapy is a sign of strength, not of weakness. Free yourself from the stigma that can be associated with seeking mental health care. Starting therapy is a sign that you're taking ownership of your narrative, and prioritizing your mental health. It takes a lot of bravery, and it's something to be proud of.

3. Stay open to different specialties. There are a lot of different licenses in the mental health profession — from psychologists to social workers — but the most important thing is finding a therapist that you feel safe with. Make that a focus of your search.

4. Think about whether you'd prefer to do therapy in-person or virtually. Virtual therapy can be done from home, offers a much wider selection of providers, and is often more affordable. BetterHelp, for example, has a network of over 25,000 licensed therapists and costs between $60-$90 a week. On the other hand, in-person therapy can be more appropriate for people with mental health challenges that may require in-person care, like substance abuse issues or severe eating disorders.

5. Try messaging with your therapist first if you don't feel ready for a full session. Starting therapy with someone you've never met before can be scary. If that feels like too much, start by messaging with your therapist, which is an option on BetterHelp and some other online providers. Messaging can be a very effective tool for processing feelings on your own time and getting to know your therapist a little bit better.

6. Consider the cost. If you have insurance, call the number on the back of your card to see whether there are affordable providers in-network. For non-insurance options, consider an online provider like BetterHelp, which charges significantly less per hour for regular sessions. Finally, consider group sessions, where you share the cost of services with others in a discussion-based format.

7. Don't get discouraged if the first therapist you speak with isn't the right fit. Therapy is super personal, and sometimes it takes a few tries to find someone you connect with enough to continue working with them in the long term. Finding a good match can take time, and it can make a huge difference. Some services, like BetterHelp, make it easy to switch between therapists and can work with you to help you find the right match.

Starting therapy is a major step — and one that can take a lot of courage and time. The work you put in up front is an investment in your long-term wellness. In my decade as a therapist, I've seen the transformative effect that therapy can have on people's lives. If you're considering it, take the leap and give it a try.

Scan the QR code or visit **betterhelp.com/gq** for 10% off your first month.

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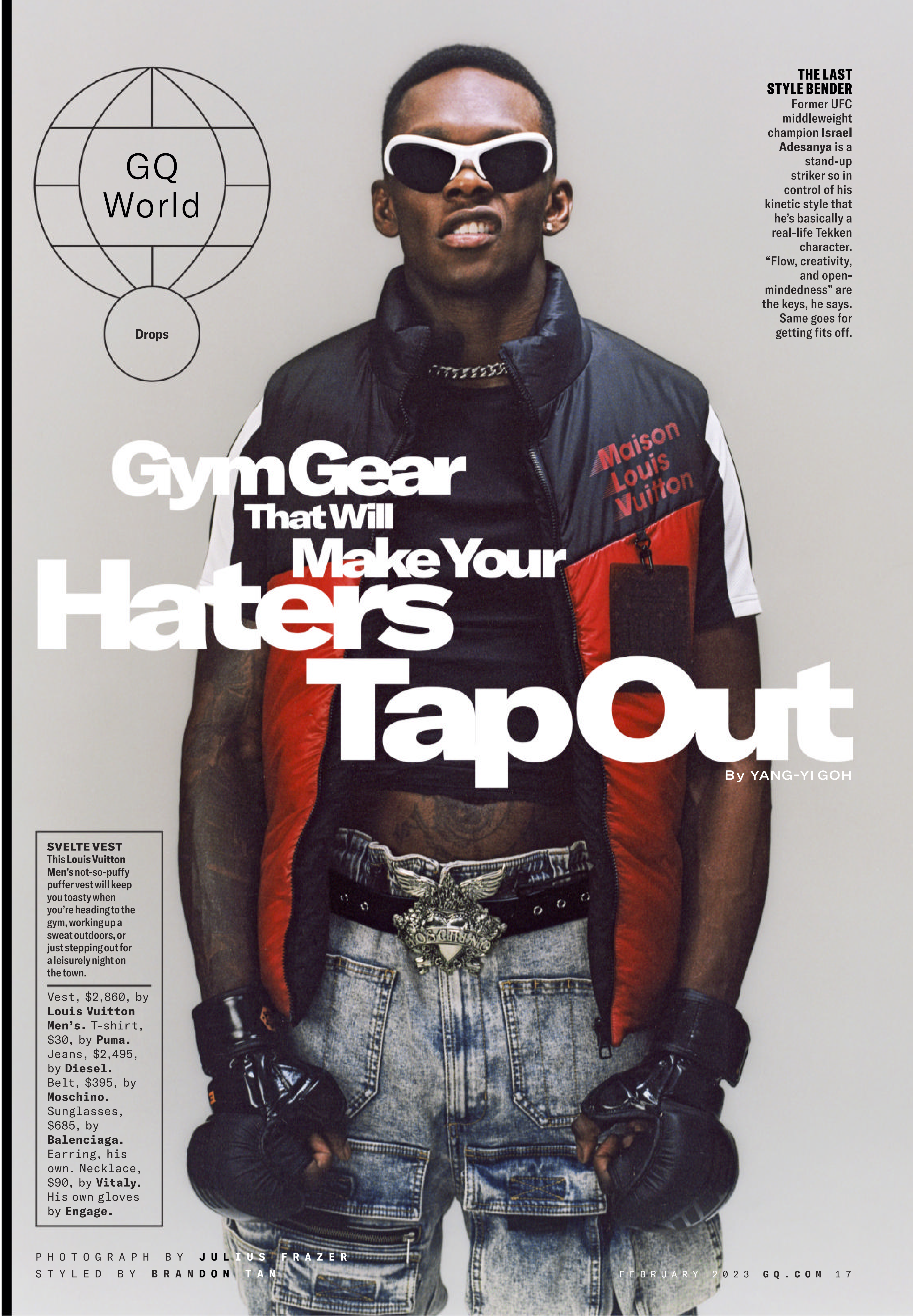
GQ World

Drops



Gym Gear That Will Make Your Haters Tap Out

By YANG-YI GOH

THE LAST STYLE BENDER
Former UFC middleweight champion **Israel Adesanya** is a stand-up striker so in control of his kinetic style that he's basically a real-life Tekken character. "Flow, creativity, and open-mindedness" are the keys, he says. Same goes for getting fits off.

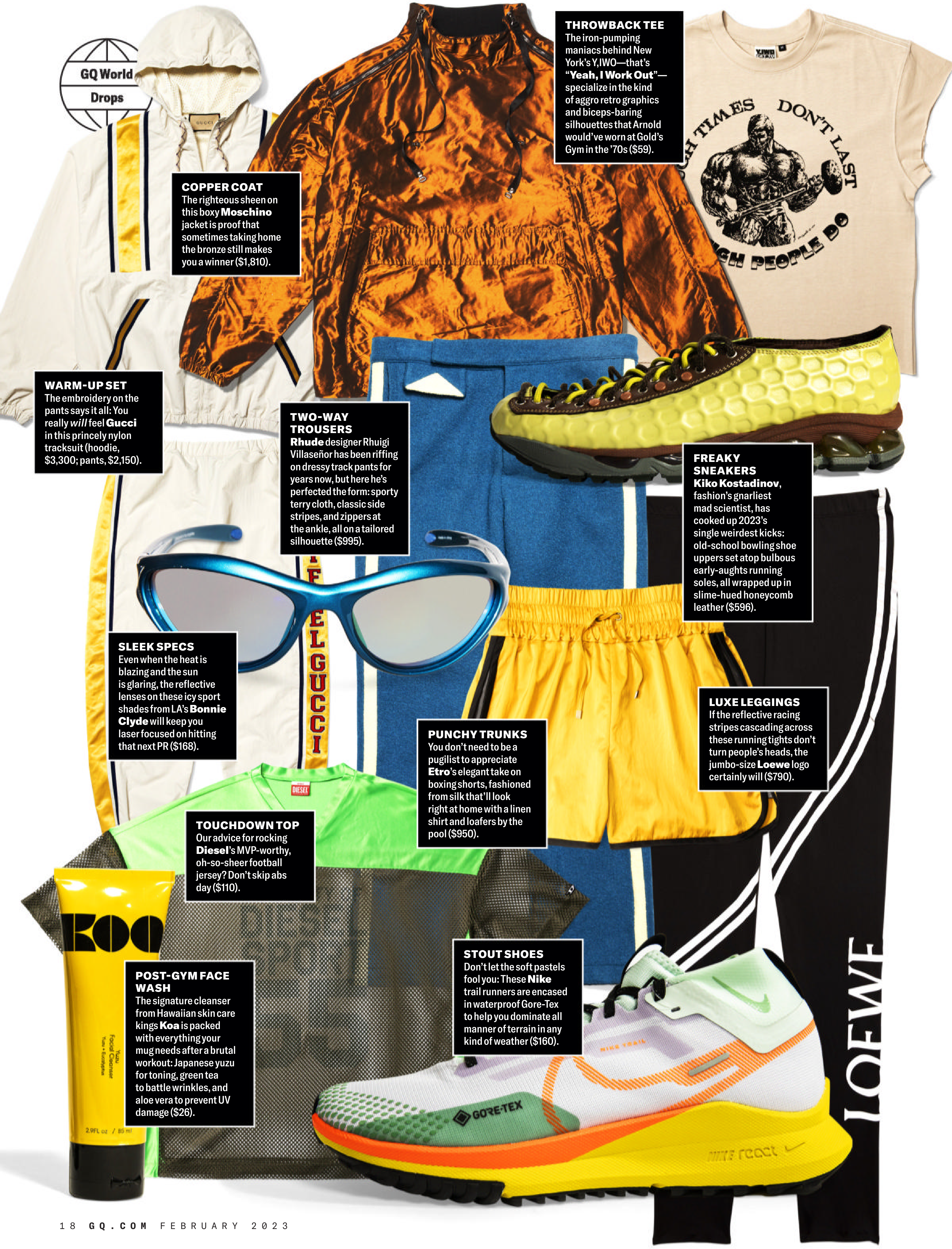
SVELTE VEST
This **Louis Vuitton Men's** not-so-puffy puffer vest will keep you toasty when you're heading to the gym, working up a sweat outdoors, or just stepping out for a leisurely night on the town.

Vest, $2,860, by **Louis Vuitton Men's.** T-shirt, $30, by **Puma.** Jeans, $2,495, by **Diesel.** Belt, $395, by **Moschino.** Sunglasses, $685, by **Balenciaga.** Earring, his own. Necklace, $90, by **Vitaly.** His own gloves by **Engage.**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **JULIUS FRAZER**
STYLED BY **BRANDON TAN**

GROOMING, VALISSA YOE USING ARMANI SKINCARE; TAILORING, KSENIA GOLUB.

GQ World Drops



COPPER COAT
The righteous sheen on this boxy **Moschino** jacket is proof that sometimes taking home the bronze still makes you a winner ($1,810).

THROWBACK TEE
The iron-pumping maniacs behind New York's Y,IWO—that's **"Yeah, I Work Out"**—specialize in the kind of aggro retro graphics and biceps-baring silhouettes that Arnold would've worn at Gold's Gym in the '70s ($59).

WARM-UP SET
The embroidery on the pants says it all: You really *will* feel **Gucci** in this princely nylon tracksuit (hoodie, $3,300; pants, $2,150).

TWO-WAY TROUSERS
Rhude designer Rhuigi Villaseñor has been riffing on dressy track pants for years now, but here he's perfected the form: sporty terry cloth, classic side stripes, and zippers at the ankle, all on a tailored silhouette ($995).

FREAKY SNEAKERS
Kiko Kostadinov, fashion's gnarliest mad scientist, has cooked up 2023's single weirdest kicks: old-school bowling shoe uppers set atop bulbous early-aughts running soles, all wrapped up in slime-hued honeycomb leather ($596).

SLEEK SPECS
Even when the heat is blazing and the sun is glaring, the reflective lenses on these icy sport shades from LA's **Bonnie Clyde** will keep you laser focused on hitting that next PR ($168).

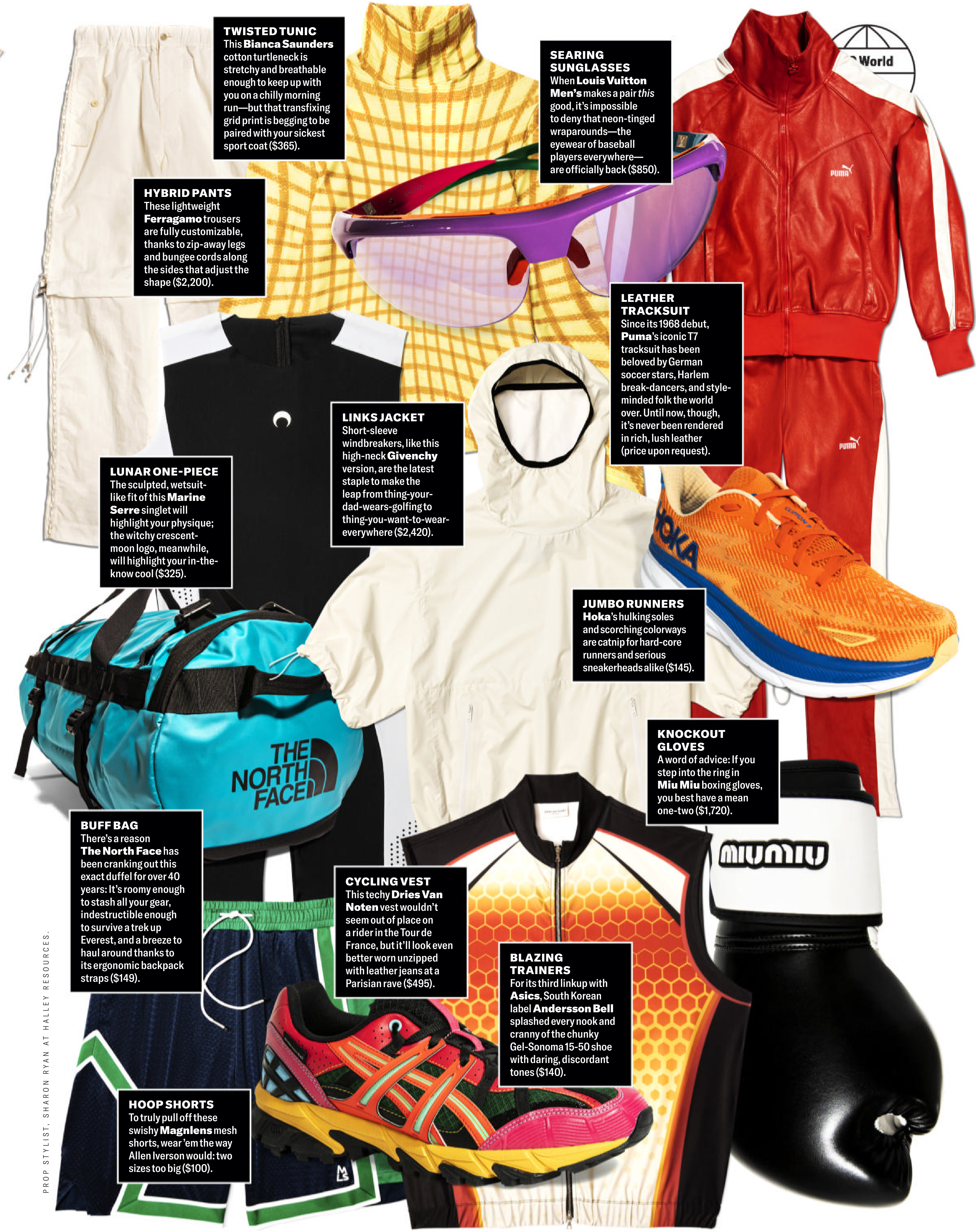
LUXE LEGGINGS
If the reflective racing stripes cascading across these running tights don't turn people's heads, the jumbo-size **Loewe** logo certainly will ($790).

PUNCHY TRUNKS
You don't need to be a pugilist to appreciate **Etro**'s elegant take on boxing shorts, fashioned from silk that'll look right at home with a linen shirt and loafers by the pool ($950).

TOUCHDOWN TOP
Our advice for rocking **Diesel**'s MVP-worthy, oh-so-sheer football jersey? Don't skip abs day ($110).

POST-GYM FACE WASH
The signature cleanser from Hawaiian skin care kings **Koa** is packed with everything your mug needs after a brutal workout: Japanese yuzu for toning, green tea to battle wrinkles, and aloe vera to prevent UV damage ($26).

STOUT SHOES
Don't let the soft pastels fool you: These **Nike** trail runners are encased in waterproof Gore-Tex to help you dominate all manner of terrain in any kind of weather ($160).



TWISTED TUNIC
This **Bianca Saunders** cotton turtleneck is stretchy and breathable enough to keep up with you on a chilly morning run—but that transfixing grid print is begging to be paired with your sickest sport coat ($365).

SEARING SUNGLASSES
When **Louis Vuitton Men's** makes a pair *this* good, it's impossible to deny that neon-tinged wraparounds—the eyewear of baseball players everywhere—are officially back ($850).

HYBRID PANTS
These lightweight **Ferragamo** trousers are fully customizable, thanks to zip-away legs and bungee cords along the sides that adjust the shape ($2,200).

LEATHER TRACKSUIT
Since its 1968 debut, **Puma**'s iconic T7 tracksuit has been beloved by German soccer stars, Harlem break-dancers, and style-minded folk the world over. Until now, though, it's never been rendered in rich, lush leather (price upon request).

LINKS JACKET
Short-sleeve windbreakers, like this high-neck **Givenchy** version, are the latest staple to make the leap from thing-your-dad-wears-golfing to thing-you-want-to-wear-everywhere ($2,420).

LUNAR ONE-PIECE
The sculpted, wetsuit-like fit of this **Marine Serre** singlet will highlight your physique; the witchy crescent-moon logo, meanwhile, will highlight your in-the-know cool ($325).

JUMBO RUNNERS
Hoka's hulking soles and scorching colorways are catnip for hard-core runners and serious sneakerheads alike ($145).

KNOCKOUT GLOVES
A word of advice: If you step into the ring in **Miu Miu** boxing gloves, you best have a mean one-two ($1,720).

BUFF BAG
There's a reason **The North Face** has been cranking out this exact duffel for over 40 years: It's roomy enough to stash all your gear, indestructible enough to survive a trek up Everest, and a breeze to haul around thanks to its ergonomic backpack straps ($149).

CYCLING VEST
This techy **Dries Van Noten** vest wouldn't seem out of place on a rider in the Tour de France, but it'll look even better worn unzipped with leather jeans at a Parisian rave ($495).

BLAZING TRAINERS
For its third linkup with **Asics**, South Korean label **Andersson Bell** splashed every nook and cranny of the chunky Gel-Sonoma 15-50 shoe with daring, discordant tones ($140).

HOOP SHORTS
To truly pull off these swishy **Magnlens** mesh shorts, wear 'em the way Allen Iverson would: two sizes too big ($100).

PROP STYLIST, SHARON RYAN AT HALLEY RESOURCES.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ALEX HODOR-LEE**

GQ World
Watches

Introducing our new watch columnist, **Cam Wolf**

SEIKO
5
SPORTS
MON 2
SEIKO
SPORTS
TACHYMETER
SEIKO
Sportsmatic
5
WATERPROOF
DIASHOCK 21 JEWELS
TUE 3

The Only First Watch You'll Ever Need

GQ's new watch columnist, senior style writer Cam Wolf, makes the case for the funky, inexpensive Seiko 5 Sports series as the ultimate entry point for any aspiring watch collector.

From left: The Seiko 5 Sports line's tangerine UFO shows off outrageous design, the Speedtimer made watch history as one of the first automatic chronographs on the market, and the Sportsmatic boasts a killer military association.

PEOPLE HAVE all kinds of reasons for embarking on the journey of watch collecting. Some are looking for fashion watches to pair with their best fits. Others want to invest in pieces that will appreciate in both value and prestige. And some, frankly, just want to flex on the 'gram. Regardless of where a budding collector might be headed, the first question they all have is the same: Where do I start?

My answer is the Seiko 5 Sports line. These watches check all the boxes: They're affordable, distinctive, and, despite costing a fraction of what most mechanical sports watches do, are built to last. The famed Japanese watchmaker launched the 5 Sports line in 1968, and revamped it in 2019 when it released watches across five functionally driven "styles"—from Suits and Street to Sports—at prices that seem to be missing a zero, dipping below $300 for some models.

For the aspiring collector who has never owned a watch, the attractive price point of a 5 Sports may be all the convincing one needs. And for the burgeoning horologist who already owns a timepiece or two, these watches come with the history, the quality, the sophisticated design, and the functionality that make them every bit as essential as any Swiss brand to a well-rounded collection.

History is always one of the most important factors when considering a collection-worthy watch, and the Seiko 5 Sports collection has stories to tell. The Sportsmatic was allegedly used by special-ops teams in the Vietnam War, and the Speedtimer, now part of a different Seiko collection, was one of the first automatic chronographs to hit the market—a landmark innovation that put it in competition with the Swiss watch industry in the 1960s. Collectors have since bestowed nicknames (the UFO, the Sushi Roll) on some of the funky designs from the early years—watches that today are as unique and recognizable as anything on the auction block.

But what feels most exciting about the Seiko 5 Sports line these days is that it's not content to simply lean on its past. The lineup of recent collaborations speaks to the way these watches are pushing into the future and engaging with new and growing cadres of watch lovers. Those partners include prep purveyor Rowing Blazers, the streetwear brand Huf, and even Queen guitarist Brian May. In 2021, Seiko released a gold-faced model designed by fans, chosen from more than 48,000 submissions—helpful proof of the sizable community of devotees.

That club of Seiko 5 Sports owners is loaded with athletes and entertainers too, many of whom are noted aficionados of high horology—guys like comedian Ronny Chieng, former NBA player J.J. Redick, and actor Daniel Dae Kim. "You don't have to be a millionaire to enjoy watch collecting," says Dae Kim. "My dad had a Seiko Speedtimer 5 Sports, and since then they've always had a special place in my heart."

Ronny Chieng points out that this is the watch worn by both Bruce Lee and James Bond—a fact that underscores how Seiko 5s have parallels with the story of Asians in America thus far. "[They're] elegantly made with superlative performance, durability, and an underappreciated heritage," Chieng says. "This is what I think of when I wear my Seiko 5s."

The Seiko 5 Sports line might be best known as an affordable option, but collectors aren't sacrificing quality, durability, history, or even celebrity cosigns in buying one. Yes, these are great watches to start with, but the Seiko 5 line is so deep with interesting watches you could—and many do—spend a lifetime collecting them.

1971 SEIKO 6119-6400 "SAUCER" SPORTS DIVER: COURTESY OF DC VINTAGE WATCHES. 1973 SEIKO 6138-0011 YACHTMAN: COURTESY OF SEIKO. 1960S SEIKO SPORTSMATIC 5 REF. 6619-8060 'MACV-SOG'. COURTESY OF HODINKEE.

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FEW THINGS ARE as brain-reorienting or as life-affirming as communally watching the best athletes in the world go at each other's throats: the roaring crowds, the adrenaline rush, the after-parties. After having spent the past few years cramped indoors, we spanned the globe to collect the best live sports experiences—some you've heard of, many you probably haven't—that are worthy of your hard-earned credit card miles, no prior fandoms necessary.

ULTRA-TRAIL DU MONT-BLANC

Chamonix, France

What is it? The toughest and most scenic ultramarathon in the world, it's a 106-mile sufferfest that takes runners up more than 30,000 feet of elevation and through three countries—France, Switzerland, and Italy—all set amid a weeklong late-summer party in the alpine town of Chamonix. **What's the vibe?** "It's Burning Man meets the Tour de France, plus the world's best outdoor-apparel expo," says Topher Gaylord, an 11-time finisher who placed second in 2003. **Optimize your experience by...** Getting to town a few days before the start of the race. Book a stay at the ultra-hip La Folie Douce Hôtel overlooking the town center for convenient access to views of the race and nightly DJ sets.

SURFING AT NAZARÉ

Nazaré, Portugal

What is it? Simply the best place to watch surfers from all over the world try to conquer the biggest waves on earth. **What's the vibe?** Nazaré is a quaint, biblically named fishing village perched impossibly close to objectively awe-inspiring surf breaks. **Optimize your experience by...** Visiting during the primo big-wave months (October to March). Get the best view at the red lighthouse by Praia do Norte, where you can both watch pros battle 100-footers and feel small in comparison to the vast power of nature.

THE MASTERS

Augusta, Georgia

What is it? Golf's most prestigious tournament. A sepia-toned, no-phones-allowed, elaborately stage-managed, moderately airbrushed evocation of golf's glorious past. **What's the vibe?** Genteel. Augusta National Golf Club is basically Disneyland for the power elite. **Optimize your experience by...** Dropping by the pro shop, which is famous for inducing grown men to drop thousands of dollars on logoed merch. What you really want is the folding chair. Stick your business card in the slot on the backrest and drop it at Amen Corner (where the 11th, 12th, and 13th holes converge) first thing in the morning—you've claimed your spot for the day.

SUPERCLÁSICO: BOCA JUNIORS VS. RIVER PLATE

Buenos Aires

What is it? The fiercest soccer rivalry in the world, this annual derby between two major Buenos Aires teams has bad blood that's been building since 1913. Emotions run high, loyalties run deep, and the entire city gets shrouded in tension and electrifying energy in the days before and after the September matchup. **What's the vibe?** *Intense.* So intense that once a guy burned his friend's house down over a Superclásico argument. **Optimize your experience by...** Pregaming with a cocktail of Fernet and Coke before you take in the 100-foot banners, nonstop chants, and colored smoke—then dodge the riot police afterward.

THE HANSHIN TIGERS AT KOSHIEN STADIUM

Nishinomiya, Japan

What is it? Hard-core baseball at Nishinomiya's Koshien Stadium, the country's oldest ballpark and where the beloved Hanshin Tigers play. Baseball in Japan is like a turbocharged version of America's pastime: The crowds are fanatical, the drums nonstop, and the food is pretty killer too. **What's the vibe?** A very unsober and communal after-hours karaoke sesh. **Optimize your experience by...** Belting out the club's famed fight song, "Rokko Oroshi," along with the crowd, after the Tigers pick up the W. And be sure to stop by the team shop for elite merch; the Tigers have one of the coolest logos in all of sports.

THE DIME GLORY CHALLENGE

Montreal

What is it? A skateboarding anti-competition where the best skaters in the world risk life, or at least limb, attempting irreverent, outlandish tricks in the spirit of showmanship. What it lacks in medals, awards, and judges, it more than makes up for in foam pits, fake volcanoes, pyrotechnics, and swords. **What's the vibe?** *Jackass,* but make it French Canadian. **Optimize your experience by...** Joining the crowd at the city's old Olympic Stadium to egg on some of today's boldest skaters. Then head over to the parking lot down the street from the Dime store for their block party.

Previous page: Runner Mathieu Blanchard finishes the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc, 2021.

Below: Spectators gather for one of the big jumps at the Red Bull Hardline.

DAN GRIFFITHS/RED BULL CONTENT POOL VIA AP IMAGES.

Golfers compete at the Masters, 2022.

DAVID CANNON/GETTY IMAGES.

TRIPLEMANIA
Mexico City

What is it? Triplemania is Mexico's answer to Wrestlemania—the biggest and baddest annual showcase of *lucha libre,* the wildest and most high-flying form of pro wrestling. **What's the vibe?** The operatic flair of a telenovela with holy-shit-ness of live gymnastics. Expect at least one *luchador* to get his mask dramatically torn off. **Optimize your experience by...** Copping your own mask and bootleg tee from one of the dozens of stands outside the arena beforehand.

THE RED BULL HARDLINE
Machynlleth, Wales

What is it? Extreme mountain biking against a surreal backdrop of the lushest greenery in the world. **What's the vibe?** Crunchy adrenaline. Backwards hats, Clif bars, Gore-Tex. Prepare to hike. **Optimize your experience by...** Avoiding the massive jump just before the finish line and instead trudging up the hill where the crowd dissipates and racers pull out their most holy-shit midair tricks.

MUAY THAI AT RAJADAMNERN STADIUM
Bangkok

What is it? Rajadamnern is the place to catch Thai boxing's most elite athletes multiple nights a week—and it's one of the few places in the country where gambling is legal. **What's the vibe?** Bets are collected on the second floor using hand signals, which lends the stadium an air of impropriety: In 2014, then 17-year-old superstar Sangmanee was poisoned before a match with a cocktail of benzodiazepine. (He's fine now.) **Optimize your experience by...** Coughing up 2,000 baht (just over $55) to sit ringside, where you can smell the minty Thai oil rubbed on all the fighters.

WIMBLEDON
London

What is it? The pinnacle of tennis. Founded in 1877, it's the oldest tennis tournament and the only major still played on grass. **What's the vibe?** While the players are uniformed in white, celebrities at Wimbledon show out in their biggest fits. (See: David Beckham in 2022, whose brown double-breasted jacket with a brown tie generated its own news cycle.) **Optimize your experience by...** Watching a match or two for cheap on the big screen with the cheekier fans on Henman Hill, the grass terrace just outside Court No. 1 named for the perennial English favorite who never managed to win.

THE HAHNENKAMM RACES
Kitzbühel, Austria

What is it? Death-defying World Cup skiing in a medieval mountain town, where the after-parties are as debauched as the course is dangerous. **What's the vibe?** Raucous alpine bacchanalia. **Optimize your experience by...** Skiing down the slope parallel to the track and watching the pros whiz by at speeds of over 85 mph with 50,000 fellow spectators. Après ski, hit up the notoriously wild blowout at the Londoner pub, where it's tradition for the winner of Saturday's race to take over bartending duties. *Prost!*

OLE MISS VS. LSU FOOTBALL
Oxford, Mississippi

What is it? The granddaddy of tailgates. The Grove, Ole Miss's oak-lined lawn, is a posh world where the tents have chandeliers and families have held down their turf for generations. When LSU's rowdy fans invade, two proud Southern cultures collide. **What's the vibe?** Pregaming with a gridiron intensity. "From a *Braveheart* standpoint, LSU owns tailgating," says John Currence, the James Beard Award winner whose City Grocery catered Ole Miss tailgates for years. "These guys have rigs with 12 spitfires and they're

SON
DIAMANT
CAPILLA DEL

Boca Juniors fans celebrating at the Superclásico in Buenos Aires.

cooking alligator and gumbo." **Optimize your experience by...** Arriving by 8 a.m. and seeking out a tailgate catered by local pros Grit—smoked beef brisket sliders, fried green tomato BLTs, jambalaya for a cold day.

PALIO DI SIENA

Siena, Italy

What is it? Twice a summer since the Middle Ages, 10 jockeys have contested this turbocharged horse race around the central square of the Tuscan town of Siena. **What's the vibe?** Siena is usually a quiet, conservative place, but this is when the locals go nuts. "It's like a pressure valve," says filmmaker Cosima Spender, whose 2015 documentary *Palio* captured the spectacle. **Optimize your experience by...** Arriving early and nabbing a spot by San Martino, the course's famous corner that horses have to round just right; otherwise they'll go careening into a column. Afterward, follow the crowd. "The winning jockey is paraded out of the square," says Spender. "It's so pagan."

THE NHL WINTER CLASSIC

Various locations

What is it? Pro hockey—outdoors! The peculiar alchemy of uncertain weather conditions, hot-cider-sipping crowds, and chippy on-ice action has established it as a wintry spectacle unlike anything else in sports. **What's the vibe?** College football meets small-town winter carnival. **Optimize your experience by...** Catching the alumni game before the main event, where legends from both teams take to the ice to recapture a flash of the old magic.

THE DREW LEAGUE

Los Angeles

What is it? The rowdiest hoops on earth crammed inside a high school gym just north of Compton. Find yourself within sneezing distance of NBA royalty: Kevin Durant, Trae Young, LeBron James, and countless others have all been known to drop by the pro-am runs unannounced. **What's the vibe?** The raw street-ball energy of the old AND1 Mixtape Tour. **Optimize your experience by...** Knowing which stars suit up for which Drew team. Since DeMar DeRozan and LeBron technically play for the MMV Cheaters, for example, you can increase your odds of watching one of them dunk on a barista by showing up to a Cheaters game.

TOUR DE FRANCE

Various locations

What is it? The apex of cycling. This year the tour celebrates its 110th birthday, with the race starting in Bilbao, Spain, the heart of Basque Country, and the final sprint zipping through the massive crowds lining the Champs-Élysées in Paris. **What's the vibe?** Twenty-three days of Strava Christmas. **Optimize your experience by...** Enjoying the finish at Paris one more time. With the last leg of the 2024 Tour moving to Nice, there is no guarantee the iconic finale on the Champs-Élysées will happen again anytime soon.

CHENNAI SUPER KINGS VS. MUMBAI INDIANS

Chennai, India

What is it? India's version of El Clásico. Chennai's century-old M.A. Chidambaram Stadium is the best place to catch this cricket match thanks to its hallowed stands, redesigned with strategic gaps to allow the fresh ocean breeze to filter in and cool down the stadium. **What's the vibe?** Electric. The fans are the most knowledgeable anywhere. **Optimize your experience by...** Two-stepping with the crowd to "Whistle Podu," the Super Kings' earworm of an anthem.

MONACO GRAND PRIX

Monte Carlo

What is it? It's the sexiest event on the Formula 1 calendar. A 78-lap race through the winding, narrow streets of Monte Carlo and La Condamine. **What's the vibe?** Glamorous. As Monaco native Charles Leclerc has said, "It's part of the myth of Formula 1." **Optimize your experience by...** Watching from the grandstand by the famous Casino de Monte Carlo, or, if you're willing to spend a little more (or have the right connections), from a yacht in the harbor.

MATÍAS BAGLIETTO/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES.

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DEION SANDERS ENTERS HIS PRIME

The multisport icon brought once-struggling Jackson State University back to its championship ways and, in the process, made himself the hottest coach in college football. Now as he heads to the University of Colorado, Coach Prime is ready to answer his next calling and take on the most daunting challenge of his career.

BY DONOVAN X. RAMSEY   PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADRIENNE RAQUEL   STYLED BY MOBOLAJI DAWODU

←←
PREVIOUS PAGE
AND THIS PAGE
coat $995
Adrienne Landau

sweater $750
Paul Smith

pants $1,850
Factor’s

boots $1,176
Santoni

sunglasses
$750 each
Jacques Marie Mage

necklace
(throughout),
his own

→
coat $995
Adrienne Landau

turtleneck $1,495
Brioni

pants $670
Etro

boots $2,250
Tom Ford

sunglasses $650
Gucci

THE WAY COACH saw it, this was how it had to be—the private jet, the frantic rush, the dramatic nighttime arrival in Colorado.

“Everything is strategic. We couldn’t wait,” Deion Sanders said to me in the hours after he’d touched down in the state to be announced as the University of Colorado’s next head football coach.

He’d flown straight from Jackson, Mississippi, where he’d just led Jackson State University to its second straight Southwestern Athletic Conference title. He did not pause to celebrate. Fans and players danced and hugged, but Sanders had a plane to catch, a new job waiting. As the championship trophy was readied, cameras caught him with his arms folded, appearing to tell officials, “Let’s go, let’s go.” He skipped the postgame press conference and instead met with his team to explain that he was leaving.

Hours later, he was strolling from the jet in a long black coat trimmed in fur. A small red carpet had been put down at the airport, and Sanders made his way across it as cameras flashed in the night. Fans and followers who’ve charted the rise of Coach Prime on social media would have recognized the colossal ring dangling from the gold chain around his neck as the one gifted to him by the rapper Key Glock in a video that had gone viral. Clutching a Louis Vuitton duffel, Sanders jumped into a sprinter van.

Critics were already noting the speed of the exit. Some couldn’t help but wonder if Sanders was flashing a bit of his old high step as he lit out from Jackson to ink a deal in Boulder worth $29.5 million over five years, before bonuses and incentives. Sanders told me that wasn’t the case, though. “We’re not trying to hurt people and step on toes,” he said after his arrival in Colorado, explaining that he needed to begin wooing recruits. The transfer portal through which athletes join new programs was about to open. There was little time to waste.

“Today, the portal opens,” he told me. “You know how many kids are in the portal that can help your university? That’s the jump-off today. So we *got* to announce this. You can’t wait because now you put your university in a bind.”

Of course, it wasn’t the exit that Sanders was focused on but rather the entrance. The new chapter, the next big test. Going undefeated for two straight years in the SWAC “was a blessing,” he said, “and I’m just excited about new beginnings.”

After all, this was the same Deion Sanders who, rising to fame in the 1990s, was so impatient to show what he could do that he starred in two sports at once—becoming the only person to ever play in both a Super Bowl and a World Series. His flamboyance made him an icon. Neon Deion. Prime Time. A star with the swagger and the talent to change sports, transforming pass defense into one of the most exciting games within the game. By the time he retired, he had been named to eight Pro Bowls and won a pair of Super Bowls in back-to-back years, with the 49ers and then the Cowboys.

His rebrand, these past three years, as Coach Prime has been equally eye-popping. At Jackson State, he revived what had become a lackluster program, landed one of the country’s most sought-after recruits, and even quarreled publicly with Nick Saban—the Alabama coach and reigning king of college football—about attracting talent to Jackson. Along the way, he introduced a new audience to the historically Black colleges and universities that make up the SWAC.

The challenges in front of him at Colorado—a broken-down team that stumbled to a 1-11 finish last year—are daunting in a different way. As members of the Pac-12, the Buffaloes play in the highest echelon of college football. The leap from tiny Jackson State is a big one, though, in Sanders’s mind, a natural move after proving himself in the SWAC. “Change is evident, man. It’s going to happen. That’s just going to happen in any part of life,” he told me after being introduced in Boulder. “Whenever you dominate a space, there’s elevation.”

The day before we spoke, he met with his new team. Impatient to set a tone, he told the players that he would be getting rid of a number of them. He was making room for new recruits, *his* recruits. “We got a few positions already taken care of,” he told his unsmiling audience, “because I’m

(text continued on page 36)

coat $1,790
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Emporio Armani

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for pack of six
Fruit of the Loom

pants $1,800
Gucci

sneakers $890
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sunglasses $690
**Jacques
Marie Mage**

bringing my luggage with me—and it's *Louis*." (At a presser later that day, he announced that he would be installing his son Shedeur, a star at Jackson State, as the new starting quarterback.)

Referring to the state-of-the-art facilities and plush niceties afforded to players in a big-time program—a far cry from those at Jackson State—Sanders was incredulous about how good his new players had it, compared to his old team. "Our kids would go absolutely crazy to be in the situation that you in, but you don't respect it," Sanders told the Colorado players. He framed his next step, as he often does, as divinely orchestrated: "When God sends me to a place, he sends me to a place to be a conduit of change." He was insistent that he would succeed.

"The goal is to win," Sanders told me. "When it comes to coaching, there's elevation or there's termination. You're elevated or terminated. One of the two. There is no in-between."

OVER THE LAST weeks of Sanders's time in Jackson, he found himself at the center of rumors involving pretty much every school in a Power Five conference with a coaching vacancy. His future became a daily point of debate on ESPN: After only three seasons on the sidelines, did he have the experience to lead a major program? Could he possibly replicate what he'd done at Jackson State?

To be in his presence during his final days at Jackson State was to witness a man who was intensely focused on his players, who commanded attention wherever he went. Before we first met, I was instructed to arrive on campus early. The team was to meet at 7:45 a.m. But Sanders likes to start early to teach his players a lesson in promptness. He kicked things off at 7:30.

When I entered the Walter Payton Health and Recreation Center, "You Give Good Love," by Whitney Houston, was blasting from a speaker inside of a brightly lit lecture hall. The Jackson State Tigers, almost all young Black men, filed past me into the room.

Sanders quietly took his place, wearing a black skully cap, a red Jackson State sweater, black joggers, and fuzzy slides. The young men were tired, yawning with their heads in their hands. Gunners sat up straight with pens to notebooks. The rest of the coaches and staff lined the sides of the room, but Sanders sat among the students, front and center. He sat upright with his hands clasped together in his lap. He nodded with each announcement but didn't say anything. There was a gravity that anchored the room around him.

One by one, his assistant coaches dashed to the front to present on their respective areas of expertise—defense, offense, special teams. Sanders isn't the kind of coach who micromanages every play from the sidelines. Instead, he mostly delegates the X's and O's to specialists, but will suggest plays to them based on his instincts. The assistants peppered their presentations with "like Coach says" and "right, Coach." These men were coaching, but it was clear that Sanders's approval was what really mattered.

When he finally began to speak, Sanders started talking in his raspy drawl before he was out of his seat. His lesson to the young men was more inspirational than practical; the three W's: "want, work, win."

"You've got to want this thing. Your coaches can't want it for you. Your teammates can't want it for you. Your family can't want it for you. You gotta want it for yourself," he said. "When you arrive from that want, you gotta work. Ain't nobody going to do it for you. You gotta work. End result: You've gotta win. Winning means to come first. You can't say 'I'm a winner' and you came in second."

"Want, work, win." Sanders repeated the words for emphasis, like a motivational speaker or megachurch pastor underlining his sermon's message.

After the team meeting wrapped, Sanders met with Jackson State athletic trainer Lauren Askevold for his daily physical therapy session. Players popped by to say good morning, and I went in to the small room to introduce myself. Sanders barely looked my way or said anything. I started asking questions to fill the awkward silence—reciting my credentials, including my HBCU bona fides as a Morehouse Man—and he interrupted me.

He didn't want to answer questions; he said he wanted to get comfortable with me first.

THESE DAYS, he's practically indistinguishable from other older Black men from the South. He prefers to spend his free time in the middle of nowhere, fishing on his off days. He listens to a lot of old-school R&B and soul music, artists like Curtis Mayfield and Heatwave. He lives in sweats and prefers to shave off what would be a white beard. A recent empty nester, Sanders had found a way to keep his grown children close to him at Jackson State. His daughter Shelomi joined the basketball team. His middle son, Shilo, would play safety, and his youngest son, Shedeur, was the star quarterback. His eldest son, 29-year-old Deion Jr., is with him 24/7 and runs his social media.

He's come a long way from Prime Time and Neon Deion. In his playing days, Sanders was a firecracker: brash, charismatic, stubborn, divisive, sometimes alienating to his teammates and the media. He was also unquestionably gifted. Troy Aikman, the Cowboys icon and a close friend, told me that all the bombast and athleticism often obscured his work ethic—his discipline. "I remember going in the locker room before games, and he would be over there, studying film right up until we took the field," said Aikman. "This was before the iPad, and no one was doing that. So I think it's hard to be as great and a transcendent player just purely on talent. As talented as he was, he worked hard at his craft."

He's long understood the power of attention, which led to the invention of Prime Time: the silky Jheri curl, the brick-size cell phone, and so much gold—rings, dollar sign earrings, piles of chains around his neck. "That was just me doing me," Sanders said when I asked him about his fashion choices back then. "Never had no stylist."

He was always pushing the envelope of the dress code. Sometimes, he told me, he'd wear a diamond bracelet on the field…just to see what the league would let him get away with. "But I never went against what was right," he said. "I would always walk right up to the line because it was making a statement as well."

Prime Time was everywhere in the '90s. He was friends with MC Hammer, became one of the few athletes to host *Saturday Night Live,* and even recorded a rap album that included "Must Be the Money," one of the indelible cultural artifacts of the decade. It often seemed like he was trying to leave a mark wherever he could. "My sense is Deion, like all of us at a young age, we were all chasing something," said Aikman. "He's talked about coming from humble beginnings and taking care of his mom and wanting to buy

→
robe $3,300
Etro
turtleneck $325
Paul Smith
pants $890
Amiri
sunglasses $750
Jacques Marie Mage

her a house. In order to do all that, then he had to really make his mark in athletics. Obviously, he did that tenfold.

"Most people don't catch up to what it is they're chasing," added Aikman, "but he did."

He tried his hand at a few new ventures after his playing days ended in 2006: He was an analyst on the NFL Network, owned an Arena Football League team for a while, and cofounded Prime Prep Academy, a charter school in Texas, which closed abruptly in 2015 after being plagued by legal and financial issues. He did a little coaching too, at Prime Prep and two other Texas high schools. Coaching in the NFL, though? Not for him. "I just have no desire to coach rich men," he said. "I'd rather have an impact on a younger man that needs direction."

In 2020, he landed on the opportunity to coach at Jackson State. The school is a powerhouse among HBCUs, having produced four Hall of Famers, including Walter Payton. But the program was struggling to attract talent and hadn't produced an NFL draft pick in more than a decade. That Sanders succeeded in turning things around so quickly underscores the idea that his talents are uniquely suited to today's college game. If Prime Time, as a character, was crafted to the specifics of his era, Coach Prime might be even savvier. "You got to understand, when I was playing, there was no social media," explained Sanders. "So whatever story they wrote, that's what it was. Now you have an opportunity to be definitive, to explain yourself, to be transparent, and as you."

Which is why, at 55, Sanders has embraced a tactic favored by kids much younger than him: posting relentlessly. "I think he's learned how to control his narrative," says Constance Schwartz-Morini, Sanders's longtime friend, business partner, and manager. "We weren't relying on other people to get his message out." He broadcasts daily inspirational quotes on Twitter, posts several times a day on Instagram, stars in videos on Deion Jr.'s TikTok, and has a new documentary series on Amazon Prime Video. For Coach, all attention is good attention.

His skill set makes him the ideal lead-by-example coach for the NIL era of college sports, a moment when athletes are discovering new ways to capitalize on their fame now that they can earn brand endorsements. When it comes to recruiting, Sanders's clout is unrivaled, and at Colorado he's already luring top prospects away from powerhouses: During his first recruiting weekend, he lined the football field with exotic sports cars—a Jaguar and an old GT40—that his recruits posed with as they announced their news on Twitter and Instagram.

Of course, his most obvious advantage as a coach and recruiter is that he happens to be one of the game's all-time greats. "You have coaches that never played a down of football coaching in the NFL," said Devin Hester, the former NFL star who considers Sanders a mentor. "There's a difference between them and the greatest to ever do it. He's done it before."

WHEN HE took the job at Jackson State, Sanders claimed he was answering a collect call from God to put HBCU sports center stage—and vowed to use his star power to make JSU a destination for top recruits. "It's a match made in heaven," he said at the time. "I've been offered pro jobs—so people know. I could be an assistant at any college and head coach at any college, but, at such a time as this, God called me to Jackson State."

The school's fan base exploded. Coach Prime's presence attracted unprecedented media coverage. The school's facilities received overdue renovations, paid for in part by Sanders, and new gear for the athletes sponsored by Under Armour. He redecorated his office, adding a plush carpet in some of the school colors—red and navy blue. (No shoes allowed.) He had his own quotes painted on the walls. I told Sanders it's a beautiful space. He replied, "I know. I paid for it."

After they won the conference in 2021, Sanders did the unexpected and flipped the nation's top-ranked high school prospect Travis Hunter from Florida State, Sanders's alma mater. "I got a once-in-a-lifetime chance to play for one of the greats," Hunter reasoned at the time. "I got a chance to make a change in history."

But there were limits to what Sanders could achieve. Those close to him told me that Sanders was frustrated that he couldn't transform the football program into a more formidable business. Sanders contends that the people in positions of power were sometimes resistant to change. "[I came to Jackson to] touch everything and challenge mediocrity," he said.

His friend, Georgia pastor E. Dewey Smith Jr., visited him last winter and noticed the toll the job was taking on Sanders. Smith took to calling him "Nehemiah," after the biblical figure who rebuilt Jerusalem after it was destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II. It's a nickname he said Sanders never quite accepted. "He felt like he was carrying a load," recalled Smith. "He had a desire to do things that really impact the students in the most significant way. But there were some serious resource challenges. I saw him struggling."

Quietly, Sanders was also facing the gravest health scare of his life. During Jackson State's 2021 season, Sanders had surgery to treat a dislocated toe and a hammertoe on his left foot, as well as an inflamed nerve. Nothing out of the ordinary; as a player, he was used to playing through pain. Then one morning, as Askevold, the team trainer, was changing his bandages, she noticed that both his big toe and the toe beside it had turned jet black. Sanders was admitted to the hospital that day. The diagnosis: multiple life-threatening blood clots that ran down his leg from the top of his calf. He'd also developed compartment syndrome, which was cutting off blood flow to his left foot. "I never gave up hope and I never questioned God, but I'd never been down like that," Sanders said. "I'd never been in the hospital over a day."

Doctors discussed amputating his leg from the knee down. Ultimately, they saved his leg but took the two dead toes and scooped out two sections of his calf. After over three weeks in the hospital, Sanders had lost about 35 pounds. Today, his leg is shrunken, marked with gnarled and discolored skin, and deep impressions where his flesh used to be. He walks with a slight limp that he does his best to work into a rhythmic stride. "When I get up and pee, which I do several times a night, it feels like I'm carrying a club," said Sanders. "I could easily shoot my foot and I wouldn't feel it." He tries not to acknowledge it except to say that his running days are over.

IN JACKSON, SANDERS liked to get around in a large black pickup truck. After practice, I piled into the vehicle with him and his personal *(continued on page 85)*

→
jacket $5,660
shirt $595
pants $1,930
Tom Ford

skin by barrywhite mensgrooming.com. tailoring by esther margaret and sara lyn scott. produced by petty cash production. location: hawkins jet center. helicopter: mercury aviation. picture car: the vault ms.

ALLEN IVERSON IS STILL THE ANSWER

From his braids to his tattoos to his league-destroying crossover, Allen Iverson drew the blueprint for the modern NBA superstar. That renegade spirit has made him an icon and a scapegoat—and the survivor of a long journey through mega-fame.

BY Mik Awake *PHOTOGRAPHS BY* Daniel Jackson *STYLED BY* Mobolaji Dawodu

ALLEN IVERSON IS shooting pool at a Dave & Buster's outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. He's lived here for the past few years and has made the restaurant—housed in a local mall—one of his go-to spots when he wants to unwind. Today, the place is virtually empty, and he's coolly sinking shots against an old friend, crooning Burna Boy's Yoruba refrain—"*Shayooo!*"—as balls sink into pockets. For a minute, he looks like any other suburban dad spending a day with one of his fellas. He's wearing what he calls an "everyday" fit: black tee, black sweatpants tucked into white tube socks. Those iconic cornrows of his, now threaded with gray, sit beneath a black Raiders snapback. If anything gives him away, though, it's the jewels—diamond bracelets, a bust-down Patek Philippe watch, a diamond-encrusted Cuban link with a flooded I3 logo. That and the way he moves. Because suddenly he lunges to his left, pantomimes his legendary crossover, and for an instant you see him again—that long-ago rookie who showed us the future.

It hardly feels possible that he's been out of the league for over a decade now. For many of us, he was a meteor across our youth, the underdog the NBA didn't know it needed, the prototype for the perpetually moving, bucket-getting, lane-slicing, fast-breaking, no-look-passing point guard. His first step was science fiction. He toyed with defenders, warned them his glitchy crossover was coming and still vanished. Haters will say it's a carry. In 2021, The Athletic ranked him at number 40 on the NBA's list of the 75 greatest players, and we all know why he's not top five. He took a lot of shots. He was not good to his body. He didn't win a championship or a gold medal at the Olympics. He didn't "play the part."

What he did win was more important. He won the people. He won the undying love of the city of Philadelphia. And he won the generation that followed him by unlocking the joy of the game. In no small part, he did this by fusing style and substance—changing the way basketball was played by altering how it looked. His moves were linked with what he wore while making them. The black-and-white Reebok Answer IVs that stepped over Tyronn Lue are now called the Step Overs. His fearlessness, quickness, and skill extended what seemed possible. Every reverse layup through a seven-footer's arms, every twisting runner in the lane, every spontaneous burst of creativity felt surreal, like you were watching to see if he could really keep doing it. And he could. And did. Night after night. Season after season, until the accumulated wear on his body became too much.

If his reign was brief, his influence has been unwavering. Iverson emboldened team owners to build dynasties around small, skilled players, and inspired small, skilled guards to believe that teams could be built around them. "He was playing a quarterback position on the court," explains Pat Croce, who was president of the 76ers from 1996 to 2001. "They would claim that he didn't pass the ball. Bullshit! If you would score, you'd get the ball, but if you didn't, he knew that he could. I don't even think there's a title for the position he played." He became a template not just for the next generation of quick, evasive, genre-bending point gods (Steph, CP3, Kyrie) but for the bigs with handles (KD, LeBron, Luka) who grew up in awe of what A.I. could do with a ball.

But his imprint goes far beyond the court. Everywhere in pro sports, you see the influence of his style: cornrows, tattoos, durags, throwback jerseys. He turned the tunnel into a fashion walk and the team bus into a nightclub. It's been a quarter of a century since he walked into the league, and he still feels ever present. LeBron has called him "pound-for-pound, probably the greatest player who ever played." Steph Curry joked that when he wore an arm sleeve, it was because "low-key, I've always wanted to be like Allen Iverson."

But being Allen Iverson wasn't easy. Even as he became one of the most influential players of his generation, he always seemed one of the most misunderstood. And it's taken a long time for us to reckon with his legacy, and his myth, and what it meant to endure what he did. Childhood poverty, and teenage incarceration, and racist media coverage, and a league that famously instituted a dress code specifically designed to curtail the way he and other Black players moved through the world. His story hasn't always been rosy, and it's no wonder that he's shied away from the press in recent years. But as he leaned against the table, cradling his cue, Allen Iverson seemed almost relieved to be talking, like he'd been waiting for us to catch up to him.

GQ: Where does the story of your playing style begin?

ALLEN IVERSON: I learned from Mike. I always looked at him like a superhero. That was my guy. The way he wore his wristband, the bald head. I used to like when he had that bald head with the goatee and the brace around his shin, on his calf. The man was my hero. I remember crying back when the Pistons used to beat on him. My mom had a TV sitting on a dresser, and I used to sit this close to the TV [puts his hand up to his face], know what I mean? "Back up before you go blind!" That's how much I loved him. I wanted to be that close to him. He gave me the vision to be a basketball player.

What do you mean by that?

I wanted to be looked at like him. I wanted to be feared like him. I wanted to be popular like him. I wanted to be in game situations like him. I wanted to dominate like him. I wanted to be the guy that walk up in the room and then drain the goddamn room, regardless of who in there.

Do you have any memorable interactions with Jordan from when you first got into the league?

There was a hurtful moment my rookie year. We were playing against the Bulls, and I remember Jerry Stackhouse was getting into it with Mike and Scottie Pippen. I was at the free throw line. I wasn't even in the little verbal altercation. And Scottie said something like, "If y'all don't respect nobody, y'all gonna respect us…." Me, 21 years old, young and confident, all I said was, "We not gone respect nobody." I was saying we not respecting nobody *on the dance floor.* They took it and ran with it. *He don't respect Michael Jordan?!* Just crazy-ass. It was a big-ass fucking deal because I was involved in the shit.

So Mike was the starting point for your playing style, but you came with your own recipe. How did that come about?

I tried to implement all my favorite players into one. I wanted to jump like Mike, pass like Magic, be fast like Isiah, shoot like Bird, rebound like Barkley, be dominant like Shaq. The crossover came about in college. I played with a dude from New York, Dean Berry. He was a walk-on, didn't even have his name on the back of his uniform. But he was quick and had this vicious, vicious crossover.

What made it so vicious? Hard to believe he was faster than you.

Nah, see, people think that the cross has a lot to do with speed, and it doesn't. It's actually about perfecting it. It's not the speed at all. It's making the guy that's guarding you think you're going in that direction, but you're not. It has to be perfect and look like you just going with your first step.

(text continued on page 46)

←←
PREVIOUS PAGE
blazer $1,995
shirt $795
pants $950
Fear of God

his own sneakers
Louis Vuitton Men's

sunglasses $415
Thierry Lasry

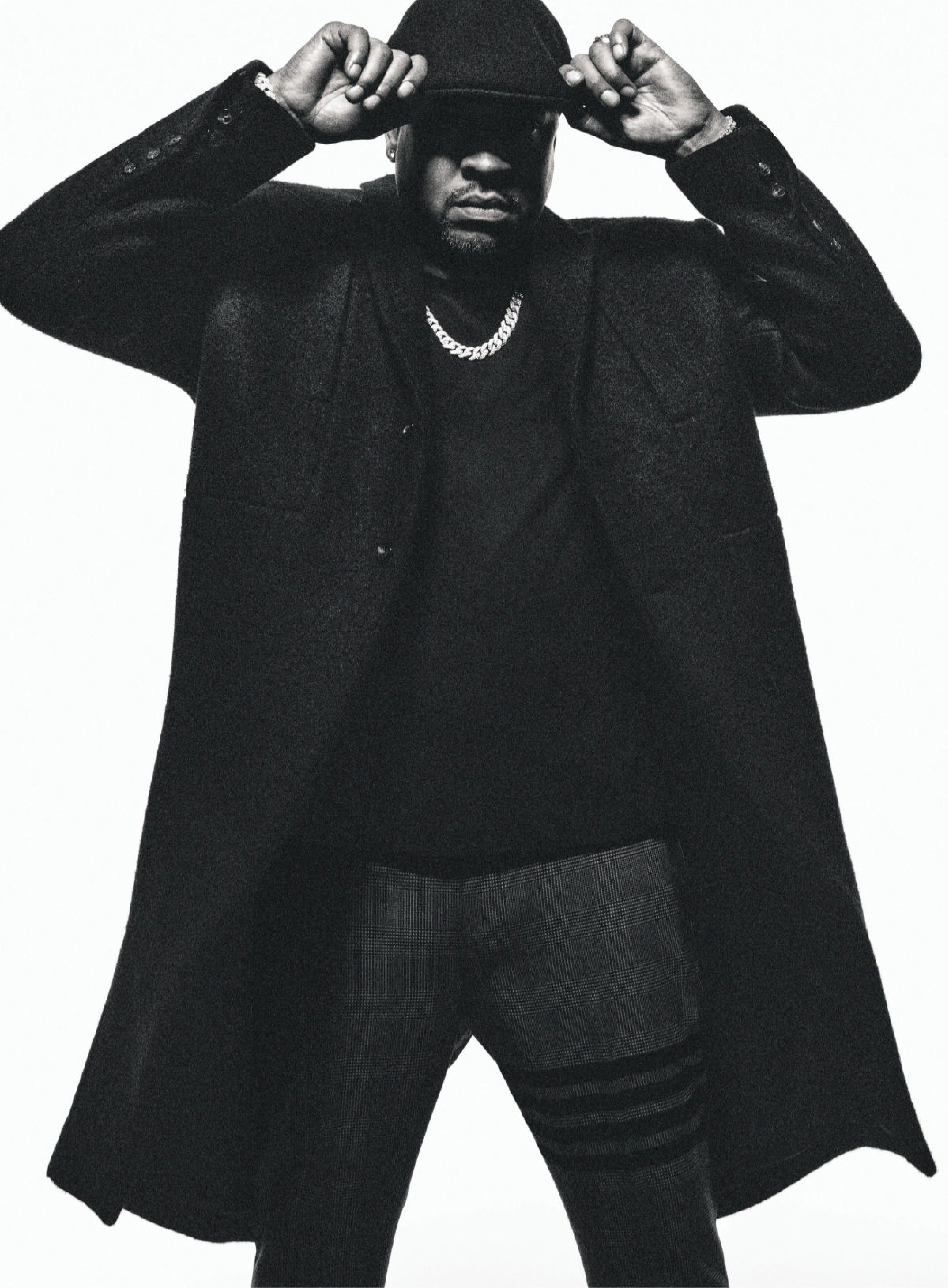
jewelry
(throughout),
his own

→
jacket $6,750
Rick Owens

his own t-shirts
(throughout)
Citylab

his own jeans
Crysp Denim

sunglasses $535
Thierry Lasry



You have to sell it.
That's what I'm saying. After a while, I threw my ego out the window and said, "Teach me how to do that, man." Today, he would tell you that mine is more vicious, but to me he's Mr. Miyagi, and I'm Daniel-san.

WHEN HE ARRIVED on the Georgetown campus in 1994, Iverson was introduced to more than just the crossover. After growing up in Hampton Roads, Virginia, living in Washington, DC, provided the Tidewater phenom his first real taste of big-city nightlife. The John Thompson–helmed Hoyas were bigger than the local pro teams. "Y'all announcing us in the goddamn club," Iverson reminisces, "and we ain't old enough to even be in the muhfucka."

By the time Iverson was making NBA money, the club was where he was headed after most games. It's also where he drew inspiration from a new hip-hop vanguard. In June 1996, Iverson was invited by Sean Combs to play for his Bad Boy team in the Entertainer's Basketball Classic at Rucker Park. Iverson didn't think twice. "Puff was my guy when it came to the jewelry and the flash," he says. "I wanted to be young, rich, and fly like Puff." In that summer of calm, before the storm of violence that would claim the lives of Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G., Iverson watched Biggie and his producer work on *Life After Death,* which would be released the following year, amid clouds of hash smoke, mutual admiration, and heaping plates of food prepared by Combs's mother. In the years that followed, hip-hop returned Iverson's love. Indeed, few athletes have as long and varied a catalog of references in popular music. As Jadakiss would put it in an iconic Reebok commercial, Iverson "brought the hood to the game."

This wasn't always celebrated. Or understood. As his stature grew, Iverson became the unofficial embodiment of what '90s-era sports marketing departments began to think of as "street credibility." The clothes he wore almost always cost orders of magnitude more than the suits other players dressed in, but he represented a vision of Black masculinity that the league and the media didn't even pretend to respect, and there was one aggressive attempt after another to police Iverson's image. Matters came to a head at the start of the 2005–2006 NBA season with the imposition of a league dress code banning Black street style: no hats, chains, durags, Timbs, or T-shirts, which seemed to everyone like a direct shot at Iverson's influence. "I just felt like it was a slap in my face, know what I mean?" he says. "Because I wasn't hurtin' nobody."

←←
PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT
coat $7,125
Rick Owens
pants $1,090
Thom Browne
hat, his own
PREVIOUS PAGES, RIGHT
sweatshirt $1,125
Dolce & Gabbana
his own glasses
Ray-Ban
→
coat $7,125
Rick Owens
hat and watch, his own

How did you develop your personal style?
It was built over time. I know it had a lot to do with the dudes that I grew up with. All throughout my life—and it still goes on today—we compete with dressing. Still.

You win any style wars when you were young?
Nah, see, we ain't had no money. So my shit was all bad, man. Honestly, back then, I didn't care too much about dressing. All I cared about was my shoe game. I didn't care nothing about the clothes. I mighta worn the same pair of jeans three times in a week.

What was the first chain you bought when you got into the league?
I had a gold diamond chain with the diamond cross on it. That was my first one. Matter of fact, on draft night I had all that shit on.

Underneath?
I had it underneath, but I had the bracelets and the ring and the Rolex on. I remember my teammates [at Georgetown] were telling me, "When you get your league money, maybe you gone get some jewelry like Pac got." Pac had the Rolex and all that. Puff was another muhfucka I admired. The swag, how cool he was, the way he is and how big he got. We was using the same jeweler, Manny the Jeweler. I went with him and Big. We in there, getting whatever. But I'm using checks. I just remember Big using goddamn cash. Big-ass knots, know what I mean? He's standing, he got on jean shorts, and you can see the big-ass muhfuckin' knots in his goddamn pants. Pac was getting his stuff from Manny's too. I actually bought the same ring that Pac had bought at Manny's. And I remember seeing Puff one time after that, and he was like, "Whatchu doin' with all my chains on?" I'm like, "Now I can get in there and get busy like you can."

The influence went beyond jewelry—pretty quickly, you began to emerge as a style icon.
[After I'm in the league] it's to the point where I can get all of this stuff that I've seen on rappers on TV or the people that had the money. And all the stuff that Puff wear, and all the other older dudes that I looked up to: Wu-Tang Clan, Red, and Meth. So it was like, okay, I can afford this shit now. But the difference was everybody in the league was wearing suits. And my mentality was, where am I going, honestly, after a game? I'm going to get something to eat, and then 9 times out of 10, I'm going to the club. Twenty-one years old, I've never worn a suit nowhere but to church and funerals. I never wore a suit to the park to play basketball.

That would be crazy.
My mentality at 21 years old is, I'm not wearing no suit to go hoop. And I think what grabbed the culture was the fact that here he is, a mega-superstar and rich, and he dressed just like us, and people had never seen that before. Then you're seeing everybody start to come to the game dressing like I looked. Everybody had the diamond chains and the big earrings. Kobe had the diamond chain and the earrings and all. So it was like somebody had to take the ass-whooping. I was the one that actually cried. I remember having that moment where I was so hurt, because they had the thug-this and thug-that, and then all of my tattoos and shit. I only had this one tattoo my rookie season because I couldn't afford tattoos. So now when I got some money, now I wanna get what I wanna get. It was like the worst feeling in the world for muhfuckas to call you a gangster and a thug, and you dream of not having to live that life and not be in the streets and all that old shit, to be on a platform where I could be looked at just like every other hardworking person in the world. It was bittersweet, because at the end of the day, look how many other people you helped. Now you can't find a basketball player without tattoos, or you can't find somebody without cornrows or dreads or without jewelry on. It's the norm.

These days, it's like we actually wanna watch the tunnel walk and game day fits on IG because we wanna see what players got on.
Put it to you this way. When you see the gangsters growing up, whether it's Nicky Barnes or Frank Lucas or Bumpy Johnson or Al Capone, what these gangsters got on? Suits! But the crazy part about it is, they were real gangsters. But I was spoken on like I was one of them because I was wearing baggy clothes, T-shirts, baggy jeans, and Timberlands, hats with a durag, know what I mean? And I got a perception of being a gangster? All I'm doing is wearing the shit that I wear to the club after the game.… Right after they tried to switch it up and do the dress code, that's when I started getting custom-made tops and bottoms. Not necessarily a blazer or nothing like that, but freaking it. Okay. May have a blazer on. May have a collared shirt on with some jeans and some sneakers.

A Yankee fitted.
All that. I'm going to flip it my way. And then when I get in the car, I'm gonna have

whatever else I wanna wear. I'm gonna keep my same jeans and my Timbs on. But I'm gonna put on this sweatshirt, and I'mma take my blazer off and go to the club or wherever it's time to go. And it was going to pass your eye test, and then I'm gonna add my flavor to it. Ain't gonna stop this show. I think, after that situation, me and [then NBA commissioner] David Stern got even tighter with each other, may he rest in peace, because I never had a relationship with him until the end of my career. And I was so glad that me and him could have that mutual respect for each other. Got love for David Stern.

Do you remember the first game you came out in cornrows?
All-Star weekend, the rookie game, where I had about 32 braids in my head.

Thirty-two?
Man, I ain't lyin'. I looked at that picture, that shit looked so terrible. I'm tellin' you. I know I had about 30 braids. Because my shit, it wasn't ready. I don't have no hang time now, but I damn sure ain't had none then. At all.

WHEN NBA MONEY started flowing into Iverson's bank account, he couldn't say no to sharing it with others from back home, especially those closest to him. "When they say that money is the root of all evil, that shit real, dog," he says. "Because we all need it. We got to have it, but it just brings so much evil." Over the years, money became another word for heartbreak. Sorrow still lingers from the times when his generosity was exploited. "Anybody that know me, know you don't have to take nothing from me," Iverson says. "I give my fucking shirt off my back."

He seems to manage his finances more carefully these days. Late last year, Iverson inked a new licensing-and-representation deal with Authentic Brands Group, Reebok's parent company, which also counts Julius Erving and Shaquille O'Neal as clients. "It's one of the greatest feelings in the world," Iverson says, "that when you can't play no more, you making millions of dollars off of what you did when you were playing."

The sense at Reebok is that Iverson continues to cast a long shadow on the culture. "I think we're gonna see a renaissance with him," says Todd Krinsky, the CEO of Reebok, which signed Iverson to a lifetime deal in 2001 that has been the subject of urban legend: Rumors of a trust he cannot access until he turns 55 have swirled on the internet for years. Iverson, whose contract prevents him from discussing the terms of that deal, considers the financial freedom brought by the endorsement to be one of the greatest gifts of his playing days.

These days, he's more careful with his money and more protective of his time. On weekday mornings, after he's dropped off his youngest daughter at school, he often sits at home in his office checking email and talking to the coauthor of his autobiography-in-progress until it's time to pick her up again in the afternoon. He's also adopted a habit of spending time only with friends who have jobs and working with people he's already cool with. His partner, Tawanna, is currently his manager, his sister is his assistant, and his aunt is his planner. "Now, do I still help people?" he asks. "You goddamn right."

Your relationship with Reebok goes back to the beginning of your career—why did you choose them?
Coach Thompson was on the board of directors for Nike. They had a deal on the table and Reebok had a deal on the table. Nike's was like five years, $10 million. And Reebok's was for $50 million. When I told Coach Thompson, I was like, "Man, I'm telling you this because you on the board of directors." He was basically like, "Man, if you don't get the fuck out my face with that stupid shit. That's a no-brainer, son. Get the hell out my office." I mean Reebok just always been loyal to me. It's the most amazing relationship between a player and a brand that you could ever think of. Never tried to market and promote me in a way that made me uncomfortable or change who I was. They still go off of who I am, opposed to trying to make me out to be something that I'm not. I'm still with them and going to be with them forever.

What else are you looking forward to?
My restaurant that we're getting ready to open in Virginia. I'm starting in Virginia. Then we gonna take it to Philadelphia because it'll be big, obviously, in Philadelphia. Then DC and Charlotte. I'm crawling before I walk.

What kind of food is it going to be?
We gotta go seafood. But we gonna do the soul food too. We put it all together.

Throughout your playing days, you supported a number of people financially, right?
All that "having money" shit was so fucking new. I had to learn the hard way. There's no way you can take care of every-fucking-body. I didn't know anything about no trust funds for my kids. I didn't know I was gonna be outta the NBA when I was out the NBA. I thought I was gonna play for a lot longer. So a lot of times, shit, you spending money that you ain't even got. But I was so happy when I was done. I didn't wanna deal with the media no damn more. I was like, "Okay, man. I'm retired. I'mma be with my family and I'm gonna live life." And when they asked me, Do I regret not playing anymore? *Hell no, I don't wanna play!* I love this goddamn life right here. This shit is crazy when you can make money by people just wanting to see you. You ain't even playing. That separates the actual impactful players for real. It's some bad muhfuckas that's 12th man on the bench, but the number one dude on the team? Oh, he gone eat forever. On top of that, it show you how loyal some fans are. They want to ride with you forever.

You get a lot of love from younger generations of NBA players who've come after you. And you give a lot of love back. What's it like to get the love and admiration of new generations of NBA players all these years after the spotlight?
I love a lotta guys. Man, I love Chris Paul. I love Luka. The list can go on and on. I love LeBron. I love Kevin Durant. And Steph Curry is my guy. I love him to death. Must-see TV. And I know that they feel like that about me.... When it's somebody your age or a little bit younger that grew up off you, that's a great feeling. But when you go in a room with the old-heads, the greats and pioneers of basketball, somebody 60, 70, 80 years old recognize me and say, "You a bad motherfucker," or they look at me and say, "Yo, you doing a good job, man," that shit is so awesome. That's the greatest feeling in the world for me. It never get old. There's a lot of people in the world that I love and admire. I love Michael Jordan, but if I can come back in another lifetime, I would rather be me all over again. A lot of people think you'd rather come back wiser. That ain't how you learn how to become a man or try to become whole. I'm trying to learn something every day. I want to try to be better. I want to try to be a better example for a kid that can learn from my mistakes. A basketball player that can learn from the mistakes I made on the court, or a human being can learn from a mistake that I made in life. I feel like a mistake is not a mistake unless you make it twice.

Mik Awake is the coauthor of the *New York Times* best seller *Dapper Dan: Made in Harlem* and author of the forthcoming *Playground Moves: The Story of Rucker Park & Basketball's Reinvention.*

→
shirt $2,350
pants $1,990
Prada

sneakers $140
Reebok

hat $42
New Era

sunglasses $350
Zegna

hair by tiffany poles. makeup by hee soo kwon using la mer. tailoring by dexter john for lars nord studio. produced by ryan fahey, agpnyc and deborah frank.

Derek Jeter WILL NEVER Retire

He was baseball's unblemished victory machine—the savviest champ of his generation. And his icy-cool aesthetic defined an era. But if you thought Derek Jeter was gonna let loose once he left Yankee Stadium, then you don't understand the much longer game he's playing.

BY BRETT MARTIN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIELLE LEVITT
STYLED BY MOBOLAJI DAWODU

DEREK JETER COMES GLIDING OUT

onto the concourse of Citizens Bank Park in Philadelphia and, hoo boy, if you're a connoisseur of heckling, you have to be ready for a show. This is Game Three of the World Series, Phillies on an unholy roll through the postseason, their fans in the kind of lather on which they famously pride themselves. There's a whole section, overhanging Tony Luke's cheesesteaks, devoted to chanting "Asshole!" at anybody who passes by in the jersey of the opposing Astros; so much booing it's hard to tell where the rancor is even aimed. And into this maelstrom, escorted by security and flanked by reps, enters Jeter, such an icon of hated New York that he might as well be a yellow taxi, to a chorus of…cheers? What the hell?

"Derek! Derek!" cry kids and grown men alike, pressing items to sign into Jeter's hands as he makes his way toward an appearance on the Fox Sports broadcast set. There's even an "O Captain! My Captain!"

One woman in Phillies powder blue mounts a valiant effort: *"De-rek Je-ter,"* she calls. You know the cadence: sometimes adoring, others, like this, mocking; either way, a song that feels almost timeless at this point, up there with "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

"De-rek Je-ter," the woman sings, "*Last time you played here, you lost.*" But it's weak sauce. She's all but drowned out by the ire pouring down on Alex Rodriguez, variously Jeter's friend, foe, and foil, who, along with the rest of Fox's pregame crew, is on air about 10 yards away, completely inaudible in the throng around the stage. Same as it ever was.

If Derek Jeter were a country, the Lonely Planet guidebook would describe it as a "nation of paradoxes." From the time he appeared on the scene, just shy of 21, he has seemed simultaneously to belong exclusively to the New York Yankees and to all of baseball. He is both eternal kid and elder statesman. His brand is both intense work ethic and effortless grace; deadly serious and, well…coolly serious. All these things remain exactly as they were upon Jeter's retirement from the game nine years ago.

He's dressed tonight in a slim gray Dior suit, a shirt whiter and stiffer than Tom Cotton, and gleaming black leather shoes, also Dior; not for Derek Jeter the ex-jock uniform of suit and sneakers. One only has to watch ESPN's *Get Up* to know that retirement settles poorly on some athletes: the specialized muscles going unused, the bulk pooling or bulging in unexpected places, civilian clothes never quite looking right. At 48, Jeter is still plausibly recognizable from the report Yankees scout Dick Groch delivered of him way back in 1992, as a 17-year-old Kalamazoo phenom:

"Long lean sinewy body. Long arms, long legs narrow waist, thin ankles. Live 'electric' movements…. Flow on the bases."

Granted, there's a little more mass now, and a little less hair, but there's no mistaking the flow any more than when Jeter ruled as the Diddy-anointed "prince" of turn of the century Manhattan. Famously, he maintained a scandal-free reign as one of the most eligible bachelors in the media capital of the world. "I just always looked at it as icing on the cake," he tells me of the days of clubs, nightlife, and dating the likes of Mariah Carey and Minka Kelly. "The bottom line was I had a job to do. I was playing every day to keep my job." Still, it was not only as a fully formed shortstop that he arrived in New York. He was, in a very old-fashioned and classic sense, a *star.*

Admittedly, at a remove—and especially if the Yankees happened to drive you mad—that same poise could read as boringness, the "class" as calculation, the *sangfroid* as just plain *froid*. In person, though, the real charisma is undeniable. As we navigate the maze of corridors, elevators, and stairwells that traverse the stadium, heads swivel and phones flash. This at a time when, with the possible exception of Aaron Judge, baseball's biggest stars could stroll down Ashburn Alley without receiving so much as a flicker of recognition. Jeter stops frequently, signs whatever is handed to him, greets the elevator operator, the security guard, the kitchen workers as we rush through.

At one point, I am sitting next to him on the back of a golf cart, rocketing along the tunnel that curves beneath the stadium. On the ground next to us snakes an enormous rolled-up American flag and, in repose around it, the various official personnel who will soon unfurl it across the field: Army, Marines, Coast Guard, the Philadelphia police and fire departments. We speed past and watch as bulbs of recognition go off one by one—"Hey!" "Jeter!" "Look!"— and uniformed men and women stagger to their feet as we recede down the corridor, as though they've just seen MacArthur reviewing the troops.

IN ADDITION TO his TV appearance, Jeter has a corporate meet-and-greet on tonight's schedule. Standard endorsement stuff, but Jeter somehow makes it feel like a papal visit. When he arrives, a clutch of middle-aged men lingers in the center of the room, glassy-eyed and on edge. Each has thought too long about the one thing he is going to blurt out when he gets his moment shaking Jeter's hand: This one's wife was born in the same hospital as Jeter. Another has some kind of mutual connection to a town in New Jersey; the guy can't stop himself from saying something about the reservoir there, words spilling out even as his eyes seem to be pleading with his mouth to stop.

Jeter is relaxed and engaged. He's spent his life in rooms like this. When asked how long he will be in town, he says he needs to be back in Miami to pick up his daughters from school the next day.

(text continued on page 56)

←←
PREVIOUS PAGE
jacket $2,295
Giorgio Armani
pants $980
Gucci
watch $11,800
Omega

→
blazer $2,650
pants $1,000
Brunello Cucinelli
shirt $450
Ralph Lauren Purple Label
watch $ $36,950
Rolex
ring (throughout), his own

suit $6,620
Tom Ford

shirt (price upon request)
Kiton

shoes $1,310
Santoni

socks $29
Falke

watch $17,400
Omega

bracelets (throughout), his own

I asked Jeter whether he wished he was on the field. "Playing?! No!" he'd said. "I played 20 years! There hasn't been a day I've missed playing the game."

"Always have to be at pickup. You miss pickup, you've got trouble," he says.

One guy, clutching a tall boy of mango-flavored beer, is trying to get to the next level. He drifts alongside as Jeter moves to the table covered with balls and begins signing, barely looking down as his pen flies across their surfaces.

"So you probably have time on your hands…since that whole Marlins thing," the guy says, referring to Jeter's decision early last year to vacate his position as CEO and a partial owner of the Miami Marlins. But it's like trying to strike a match on a bar of soap. Jeter just smiles as two workers swoop in, place an acrylic box over each ball, seal the cartons, and stack them carefully into a large blue suitcase, which is quickly spirited away. "I've got lots going on," he says. "Too much."

The guy gives up. A generation of sportswriters sympathizes. Complaining about Jeter's locked-down interview style has become a journalistic genre all its own. For 20 years he was a relentless frustrater of New York back pages, unwilling to stir even the tiniest bit of muck. He has never been sullen or standoffish, as he points out, but neither has he felt the need to be one iota more informative than he has carefully decided to be. In his playing days, his stated policy was to answer every question once and then never revisit it. It is not a position he has felt compelled to revise in retirement. Last year, when he released his seven-part ESPN docuseries, *The Captain,* the project was so authorized a biography that it practically came with a notary stamp; its credits included Jeter's agent, his agency, Major League Baseball, and The Players' Tribune, the media company Jeter founded specifically to create an end run around traditional sports journalism. The project could be seen as a seven-hour attempt to say everything he's willing to say about his career once, and then never have to address any of it again.

➔
jacket $2,250
pants $1,150
Valentino

shirt $395
Boglioli

bow tie $195
Ralph Lauren Purple Label

watch $11,800
Omega

On a podium at the meet-and-greet sits the World Series trophy, primed for a photo op. Jeter catches sight of the thing, and you can almost see a Gollum-like glimmer in his eye as he drifts over to peer at it.

This is only the third baseball game that Jeter has been to this season. The others were the All-Star Game and a game at Yankee Stadium commemorating his induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. His abrupt resignation in Miami came after four seasons there; he says he needed a break.

A line forms to take photos. Jeter takes his position next to the trophy; a handler makes sure his head isn't covering the Capital One logo behind him.

"Do I really have to pose with all these Phillies fans?" he jokes.

"You don't have to smile," says his handler.

But smile he does, until the last person has come through, some of them barely daring to look him in the eye. This is, of course, a business obligation, and, as with everything Jeter, there's a deliberateness to all his gestures, a bit of Dale Carnegie. But he is nevertheless endearing, and, frankly, it's a little confusing. Because, right up until the unfortunate, complicating circumstance of meeting the man, I would have told you, without hesitation, that I hated Derek Jeter.

"Such a strong word!" he says, when I tell him so. "I never looked at it as people hated me as a person. They don't know me. And I think if they knew me, they wouldn't hate me. They just strongly disliked the team I played for."

Oh, but I beg to differ. To *dislike* implies a real, personal, human animus. That's way more serious than the beautiful, unencumbered, irresponsible hatred that is one of the great joys of sports, just as is unquestioning, unconditional love.

It comes almost as a relief when I finally catch the faintest glimpse of the Imperial Stormtrooper that I thought I knew from years of watching him play.

"Are you a baseball fan?" he asks.

"I'm a Mets fan," I tell him.

He waits a beat. Gives a little *cluck.*

"Mets were pretty optimistic this year," he says.

"Yes," I say, as evenly as possible. The Mets led the National League East for nearly the entire season before characteristically stalling down the stretch and being summarily ousted in the playoffs. "Yes, they were."

"Well," says Derek Jeter, "It's a long season." I swear I can see a twinkle in his eye.

Monster.

NOT LONG AFTER the game in Philadelphia—the Series wrapped now; the long, dark winter begun—Jeter and I meet again, for lunch in New York. He's wearing loose blue pants and a long-sleeve T-shirt, both bearing the logo of Greatness Wins, the athleticwear company he recently started with the founder of Untuckit shirts, along with Misty Copeland and Wayne Gretzky—an intriguing squad of crime fighters if ever there was one. He looks as crisp and comfortable as he did in the suit, his stubble so consistent with the last time I saw him that its length might be measured by caliper.

New Yorkers at lunch are a cooler bunch than Philadelphians at a game, but there's still a ripple of energy as we pass through the dining room. Jeter takes a seat at a corner table, back to the wall, facing out.

His eyes flit around the room. "I see everything when I'm out," he says. To demonstrate, he lowers his voice and points out a prominent gossip-media personality, whom he asks me not to name, eating across the room. At another table, a businessman lifts his phone in a way that could be either checking a text or taking a surreptitious photo. "I see it all," Jeter says.

One narrative has it that growing up a biracial academic and athletic star in 1980s Kalamazoo prepared Jeter for the scrutiny of playing in New York. He stood out. "You get stares. You get looks. You get people laughing and whispering and pointing," he says. "You walk into a room when you're five or six years old, and everybody's staring at you." If it left Jeter accustomed to handling attention, it also helped to instill his famous guardedness.

"Maybe it's a character flaw, but it takes me a long time to trust people," he says.

Is it a character flaw? I ask.

"Well, it's gotten me to this point," he says. "You can't turn off and on who you are, right? I've just always had trust issues."

Our lunch is at the steak house in his financial-district hotel; Jeter orders a filet mignon, butterflied, medium, side of mushrooms. He sold his last apartment in New York even before he retired, renting for the final two years of his contract. In truth,

12:12
REGULAR COFFEE
DECAF

the Prince of New York was never exactly a New Yorker. He'd lived in Tampa since 1994, shortly after the Yankees drafted him. "As soon as the season was over, I'd be back in Tampa," he says. In his long NY career, he set foot in Central Park all of three times, the same number of times he rode the subway: twice for photo shoots and once, improbably, for a trip from the Upper East Side to Lower Manhattan for the ticker tape parade celebrating his first World Series championship, in 1996. If he truly lived anywhere, it might as well have been in a sixth borough named Black Car. Back and forth he went—apartment tower to stadium—on his season-long circuit.

Still, he will forever be associated with the last days of what now feels like an almost premodern Gotham Golden Age: before tech bros, before 9/11; a time of newspaper wars and *Sex and the City,* but not yet everybody who moved to the city because of *Sex and the City;* Brooklyn, but not *Brooklyn;* hideous men like Giuliani and Trump, but still only *locally* hideous; maybe the last time that New York truly felt like the only place in the world where it really mattered to be prince.

"New York was the center of the universe," Jeter says. "The Knicks had good teams. The Rangers had won. Then hip-hop took it to another level: Puff, Jay-Z. Now here come the Yankees, and we dominated for a period of time. It just seemed like all eyes were on New York and all eyes were on us." It was heady for a 20-year-old sudden star. "You'd go to clubs or lounges and everyone was there. People you grew up watching: Denzel. Jack Nicholson. And they come over to *you.* They know you on a first-name basis! It's a surreal experience when you're that young and you're having success. I don't know if I can articulate how weird it is."

Jeter has frequently said that his career would have been ruined had cellphone cameras been around. It's a good line, but of course he spent half his career in the camera-phone era. It's taken real discipline to maintain his privacy all these years. He remains exquisitely attuned to the potential of a headline, and quick to head it off. When I ask if he remembers running into Donald Trump in his Manhattan days (Jeter lived in a Trump building), the notion that he would even engage such a question is so absurd that he just laughs.

(continued on page 86)

→

jacket $1,650
Canali

his own t-shirt
Greatness Wins

his own sunglasses
Cartier

skin by lisa-raquel using tom ford beauty. tailoring by ksenia golub. set design by cooper vasquez at frank reps. produced by lindsey gardner. special thanks to the nines and jeep.

NY

NOW STREAMI GOLF’S EXIST

From left: Brooks Koepka, Tony Finau, Rory McIlroy, Justin Thomas, Jordan Spieth, Matt Fitzpatrick.

NG ON NETFLIX: ENTIAL CRISIS

When it greenlit its new golf series, Netflix was hoping to build something like the next *Drive to Survive*—then a controversial new Saudi league took aim at the PGA Tour and the fight for the soul of the game commenced. It's a good thing cameras were rolling.

BY SAM SCHUBE
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JUSTIN METZ

IN LATE 2021, the television producers Paul Martin and Chad Mumm traveled to a tournament in the Bahamas to chat with the former world number one golfer Brooks Koepka. Martin, along with James Gay-Rees, runs the production company Box to Box Films, a major player in the suddenly bustling business of sports documentaries and the company behind the Netflix series *Drive to Survive*—the megahit set in the world of Formula 1 racing that sparked the sport's boom in the States. On their way to meet with Koepka, the producers held in their minds an ambitious new challenge: finding Formula 1–style excitement in the relaxed-fit world of professional golf.

For filmmakers looking for drama, Koepka might have seemed like the right place to start, if also a rather challenging subject. After a furious stretch in which he racked up four majors in a little over two years, Koepka had ground to a brutal halt; injury had reduced him to being only intermittently competitive. He didn't much enjoy talking about it.

Indeed, in the Bahamas, he was initially reluctant to wade into his frustrations. But then, as the conversation was winding down, Martin said, Koepka opened up. "He started to talk about this vulnerability—where he really was, and how he was waking up in the middle of the night," Martin told me. The producers felt like they had glimpsed a side of Koepka that audiences had never seen. Here, they had something they could work with: an aspect of the steely Koepka that his day job forced him to keep hidden.

This month, Koepka's private struggles—along with a surprising peek into the lives of some dozen other golfers—will begin streaming on Netflix, on a show called *Full Swing*. The series is meant to appeal to both dedicated golf fans (eager for new details about their favorite players) and to golf skeptics (who, a few years ago, probably didn't know anything about Formula 1, either). When I met with the show's producers as they were finishing their edits on the series, the footage they screened for me had its share of conventional sports-doc action: big shots, big money, big personalities. But there was also plenty of the compelling and relatable human drama that makes for great TV.

Like, say, Brooks Koepka, hoodied-up and dyed blond at home in his Death Star Florida mansion, not looking much like the world-beating titan that golf fans have known him to be. He seemed, in fact, miserable—unable in one scene to talk to his fiancée about their wedding plans without glazing over and obsessing about his broken swing. In another moment, he glumly rolled practice putts across a hotel carpet while debating his future. "We see Brooks really struggling to come to terms with the fact that he's, frankly, not playing as well as he was two, three years ago, and doesn't quite know how to get a grip on stuff," Martin told me.

For the producers, the drama of Koepka trying to hold it together happened to play out against an even more unexpected convulsion in the sport: the emergence of LIV Golf, an insurgent new rival to the PGA Tour. The breakaway league is bankrolled by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, which was prepared to spend billions of dollars in hopes of establishing an alternative to golf's governing body—and boosting Saudi Arabia's standing in world affairs. LIV began siphoning players—including real-deal major winners like Phil Mickelson and Dustin Johnson—away from the PGA Tour via enormous paydays that included guaranteed contracts reportedly worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Overnight, the sport was cleaved in two. LIV intended to modernize golf—shorter tournaments, drastically larger purses, music blaring from the tee box. But those changes were overshadowed by its Saudi backing. Pro golf was suddenly the subject of headlines—strange, amusing, occasionally disturbing: Mickelson describing his new Saudi benefactors to the golf writer Alan Shipnuck as "scary motherfuckers," for instance.

All the while, a few big Tour players each week announced that they'd signed on with the competition. As outlandish as LIV could seem, though, the stakes were real: The rival league's unfathomable pool of money (and the class of talent it bought) threatened to upset the PGA Tour's monopoly on professional golf. The two leagues, as Shipnuck put it to me, were engaged in "the battle for the soul of golf."

On the ground, that fight created some complications for the show's producers. "We would turn up at events and stories that we thought we'd be telling would disappear, because this player's gone," Martin told me. One of those players was Koepka, who announced in June that he was signing up with LIV. Along with lots of other golf fans, I assumed that Koepka had made a cynical calculation driven by money. And while it's of course possible that he did exactly that (Koepka declined to speak with me for this story), the footage I saw at the very least complicated that narrative. I didn't see an apex predator on the hunt for trophies or a has-been looking for one last payday. I saw a man confronting sporting mortality. It was easier, somehow, to understand his decision to abandon the grind of PGA Tour golf.

The show had come to the world of golf looking to tell a story about the human side of the game. What it got was a sport in the throes of an existential crisis. The show may well do for golf what *Drive to Survive* did for Formula 1, minting a new generation of fans, turning anonymous stars into global brands, and elevating the sport's profile. But it might also serve as something arguably even more interesting: a real-time recording of a sport blowing up.

LATE LAST AUGUST, as the PGA Tour was winding down its season at the Tour Championship in suburban Atlanta, I found the *Full Swing* crew on the second floor of the plummy clubhouse at East Lake Golf Club. There, the filmmakers had fashioned the women's locker room into their makeshift production office for the week. This represented something of an upgrade. "We're usually in a trailer," one crew member told me.

The task before the producers of *Full Swing* in this debut season was to carve eight discrete episodes out of golf's nearly yearlong schedule, using footage captured at a quarter of the season's tournaments and featuring at least a dozen separate characters. "These are difficult shows to make," Martin told me last fall. "They're really complex. There's a lot of logistics and the edits are heavy, heavy lifts."

Each week, three or four teams of three or four people would fly to a tournament and scramble around the course in search of one or more of their cast members. Sometimes they'd film with a golfer in his rental house or car; other times, they'd simply cruise around in a golf cart looking for something—anything—happening. One drizzly afternoon in Atlanta, an enterprising camerawoman spent 15 minutes talking her way into the trailer occupied by the rules officials just so a camera could be there if a rain delay was called, which it wasn't.

The person most responsible for the show's look and feel—for the way it will hopefully communicate its insidery sensibility—is Chad Mumm, one of the show's executive producers and perhaps the production's biggest golf fan. Mumm runs Vox Media Studios, a production company attached to the digital-media brand of the same name. Mumm was clear on what the show needed to be—or at least on the trappings it needed to avoid. "It has to feel not like the golf you see on TV," Mumm told me.

Pro golfers Justin Thomas, left, and Jordan Spieth aboard a chartered jet, journeying in search of more golf in a scene from the new Netflix docuseries *Full Swing.*

OPENING PAGES: BROOKS KOEPKA, WARREN LITTLE; TONY FINAU, STACY REVERE; RORY McILROY, STUART FRANKLIN; JUSTIN THOMAS, CHRISTIAN PETERSEN; JORDAN SPEITH, MICHAEL REAVES; MATT FITZPATRICK, SAM GREENWOOD. ALL: GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF NETFLIX.

He cited *Drive to Survive*'s heightened vérité style as one influence—but also the director Paul Greengrass's shaky action films. All told, a little more *Friday Night Lights* than *Rudy.*

The pacing, editing, and tone, meanwhile, were geared toward capturing a feeling that even the casual weekend golfer knows well. "There is a level of pressure that these guys put on themselves, and in the biggest moments it is crushing as a viewer to even experience it, and live through it, and imagine yourself in that person's shoes," Mumm said.

Perhaps surprisingly, though, much of the show wouldn't focus on golf—which is, after all, already available on television every weekend. Producers estimated that actual tournament golf would comprise about a third of the show. The bulk of the action would be composed of the in-between moments. Aimless tee box chatter doesn't make the cut on Sunday-afternoon broadcasts—but it's unmatched when it comes to establishing the rhythms of life for a pro golfer. Mumm told me that the producers would often ask the golfers to simply share the ordinary, off-the-course goings-on of their days. The golfers were fine with this. "It's not like it was anything intrusive," Tour pro Max Homa told me. "It just was, we'd be eating, and you could see a camera kind of pointing at you as you ate and talked and whatnot." Martin explained that the goal here was simple: to humanize these exceptional athletes. "These shows really are about normalizing these worlds and making them relatable," he said. "Making people understand that, whether you are Joe Schmo at home or you are Brooks Koepka, when you're going through a tough time, you have the same reaction and the same experiences."

The goal was offsetting those humanizing humdrum moments with ones unique to the world of professional golf. One clip that Mumm showed me—sure to light up Golf Twitter when it airs—captures the stars Justin Thomas and Jordan Spieth on a private jet. They pass the time by playing a card game: guessing the card drawn from a deck. As if to underscore both the competitive intensity inherent to pro golfers, along with the spoils derived from enduring such intensity, the two are shown betting a thousand dollars on each draw.

IT WAS NOT always obvious that golf demanded a glossy documentary-style treatment. Mumm had long watched *Hard Knocks,* the HBO series that embeds in an NFL training camp each year, and he thought that a similar warts-and-all project could work in his favorite sport. But he initially had a tough time making the case.

He'd begun working up a plan for the show in 2019, and, with a contact at the PGA Tour, spent a year enlisting talent before pitching the series around Hollywood. Nobody bit. Gabe Spitzer, an executive on Netflix's documentaries team, told me that his early reservations were largely about the then show's limited scope: At the time, the sport's majors—its four most famous events, governed separately—were not involved. "We said, 'Look, we're intrigued,'" Spitzer said, "'but see if you can get the majors on board, and come back to us if you do.'"

So Mumm set about enlisting the majors: the Masters, the Open Championship, the US Open, and the PGA Championship. What he soon discovered surprised him. Golf's insularity had for a long time worked in its favor: Blue-chip advertisers cared about the wealth of the sport's audience, not its size. But in a world of social media and streaming television, the sport had fallen behind—and the people in charge knew it. For all the pomp and tradition of the Masters, Mumm explained, the tight-lipped folks who put on that tournament are "getting more progressive about how they tell the story. They know that the tournament can't just be for old people; they need younger audiences." (Amusingly, Mumm told me, he's heard that the Netflix engineering team considers the Masters streaming app the best on the market—after Netflix's own.)

At the same time, the stuffy world of pro golf was beginning to loosen up, and the prospect of appearing on a television show held new appeal to the players. Journeyman pros like Joel Dahmen and Max Homa were building fan bases by acting less like birdie machines and more like human beings. "As I've progressed in my years out here on the PGA Tour, I've grown up a lot, but I also decided I play my best golf when I'm really enjoying it, and I'm having a good time, and I'm being myself, really," Dahmen told me. "It wasn't, like, a set plan of *I'm going to tweet more,* or *I'm going to do more fun things.* It was just like, well, if I continue to play good golf, and I'm having fun doing it, it's okay to show the world that."

When it comes to professional golf, "tweeting more" counts as a somewhat revolutionary act. As Chris Wandell, the PGA Tour executive who worked with Mumm on the pitch, explained, in this universe, an all-access documentary was…new. "The first time this idea was put in front of our management team," he told me, "they were like, 'Wait a second, what if they swear?'" (Neither the PGA Tour nor the cast members have approval over what appears in the show.)

That Dahmen, with one Tour victory to his name, is among the sport's most prominent social media successes is a reminder that the ceiling on stardom in golf, where players are independent

(continued on page 87)

SEARCHING

As tennis's Big Three gradually loosen their grip on the sport, a new generation is emerging on the men's tour. GQ goes courtside in Paris with a crew of friends and rivals all clamoring for their first grand slam singles title—and a shot at superstardom.

BY SAMUEL HINE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ILYA LIPKIN

STYLED BY JAY MASSACRET

Matteo Berrettini.
Opposite page: Félix Auger-Aliassime.

FOR A SLAM

THE NEW GENERATION OF elite men's tennis players is a small, tight-knit group. With a pro tour that stretches from January through November, and from Melbourne to New York, Tokyo to Monte Carlo, they spend a lot of time together, shooting the shit in locker rooms, ice baths, and hotel restaurants—and in group chats that date back to their early teenage years. They talk about tennis, mostly. And lately, the conversations have revolved around a new line of speculation: *Which one of them is up next?* In other words, as the 25-year-old American rising star Frances Tiafoe put it to me recently, "Who's going to be the guy out of our group to win a grand slam, and then continue to win grand slams and be at the top of the game?"

The crop of players in contention to be that guy has arrived like an answered prayer. For the better part of the past two decades, tennis was dominated by the so-called Big Three: Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer, and Novak Djokovic. From 2004 to last year's US Open, the trio won 62 out of 75 grand slams, the historic and moneyed quartet of tournaments that make or break legacies. But by the end of last year, Federer had retired, Nadal had begun to grapple with ever-more frequent injuries, and an unvaccinated Djokovic's major appearances had become contingent on travel rules and restrictions.

Consequently, there's something of a vacancy at the top of the sport—an opening for a superstar (or a few) to set himself apart, just as a dynamic mix of creative young players are coming into their own. To survey that new bevy of talent, *GQ* traveled last fall to the Paris Masters, one of the tour's most prestigious tournaments outside the slams, where the game's top players were vying for one of the last trophies of the year. Gathered in an athletic club in the city's Left Bank on the eve of the event, seven of the draw's hottest talents joked and gossiped and discussed the year their generation broke out—and what might be ahead. "2022 was one of the first years where I felt like, going into the really big tournaments, anyone could win," Taylor Fritz, a 25-year-old baseliner from San Diego, told me. According to Tiafoe, the gap between the top players and the rest of the field has all but vanished. "It's getting wild, man," he said. "If you don't come correct, you can get it from anybody."

Tiafoe knows this better than anyone. At last year's US Open, he had the misfortune of drawing a fourth-round match against Nadal. Going into their contest, Nadal, despite his injuries, was still undefeated in major matches in over a year, and he'd dusted Tiafoe in two previous meetings. Then Tiafoe, the son of a janitor at a tennis academy in Maryland, took the Spaniard down in four sets of furious shot making. "I never knew if I was going to beat one of those dudes," Tiafoe said of the Big Three. Now, Nadal might be entertaining similar doubts. A few months after the Open, Tiafoe and compatriot Jack Sock vanquished Nadal and Federer in a match that sealed the Swiss legend's retirement. Said Tiafoe, "I don't believe in flukes."

Fans of the Big Three might argue that seeing their favorite players destroy the competition since the beginning of the George W. Bush administration has been plenty exciting. But the ATP Tour and tournament organizers have recognized a need for new energy, as evidenced by the camera crews filming the emerging stars for *Break Point,* a Netflix series produced by the same company behind *Drive to Survive,* which transformed Formula 1 into a global phenomenon (Box to Box Films is also at work on a series

(text continued on page 70*)*

Félix Auger-Aliassime

« **(Opening pages, left)**

Nation: **Canada**
Age: **22**

Don't let his gentlemanly demeanor fool you. Auger-Aliassime has a reputation for ferocity on court, hitting the fuzz off every ball that comes his way. At the end of the 2022 season, he rode a streaky stretch to win three straight tournaments; he clinched the third, at the Swiss Indoors, without dropping a single service game, and fell to the baseline in exhausted bliss after opponent Holger Rune hit the final point long. Said the Canadian, "When I saw the ball go out, for a second I didn't feel my legs under me. It's tough to describe, but it's a moment in time where you just don't know where you are anymore. You lose yourself and you feel like you're floating. Then, of course, you get up and shake hands. But those few seconds, when you see the ball go out, it's special."

Matteo Berrettini

« **(Opening pages, right)**

Nation: **Italy**
Age: **26**

Having gone to high school rather than a tennis academy, and having almost played college tennis in the States, Berrettini is considered one of the more well-adjusted players on tour. "Maybe I would have been a nice engineer," he said, if he had ended up going to college as he once planned. Now, he's a perennial major threat with a Wimbledon final appearance under his belt and a Hugo Boss modeling contract in hand. So, what's more taxing: a five-set match, or a 12-hour Boss campaign shoot in the Dubai desert? "Five sets," he said. "It's the most stressful."

←←
OPENING PAGES, LEFT
ON FÉLIX AUGER-ALIASSIME
jacket $1,550
pants $890
Dior Men

t-shirt $35
Adidas

sneakers $180
Adidas Originals by Wales Bonner

sunglasses $625
Cutler and Gross

OPENING PAGES, RIGHT
ON MATTEO BERRETTINI
jacket $248
shorts $248
sneakers $199
socks $17
Boss

stylist's own tank top
Uniqlo

compression shorts, vintage

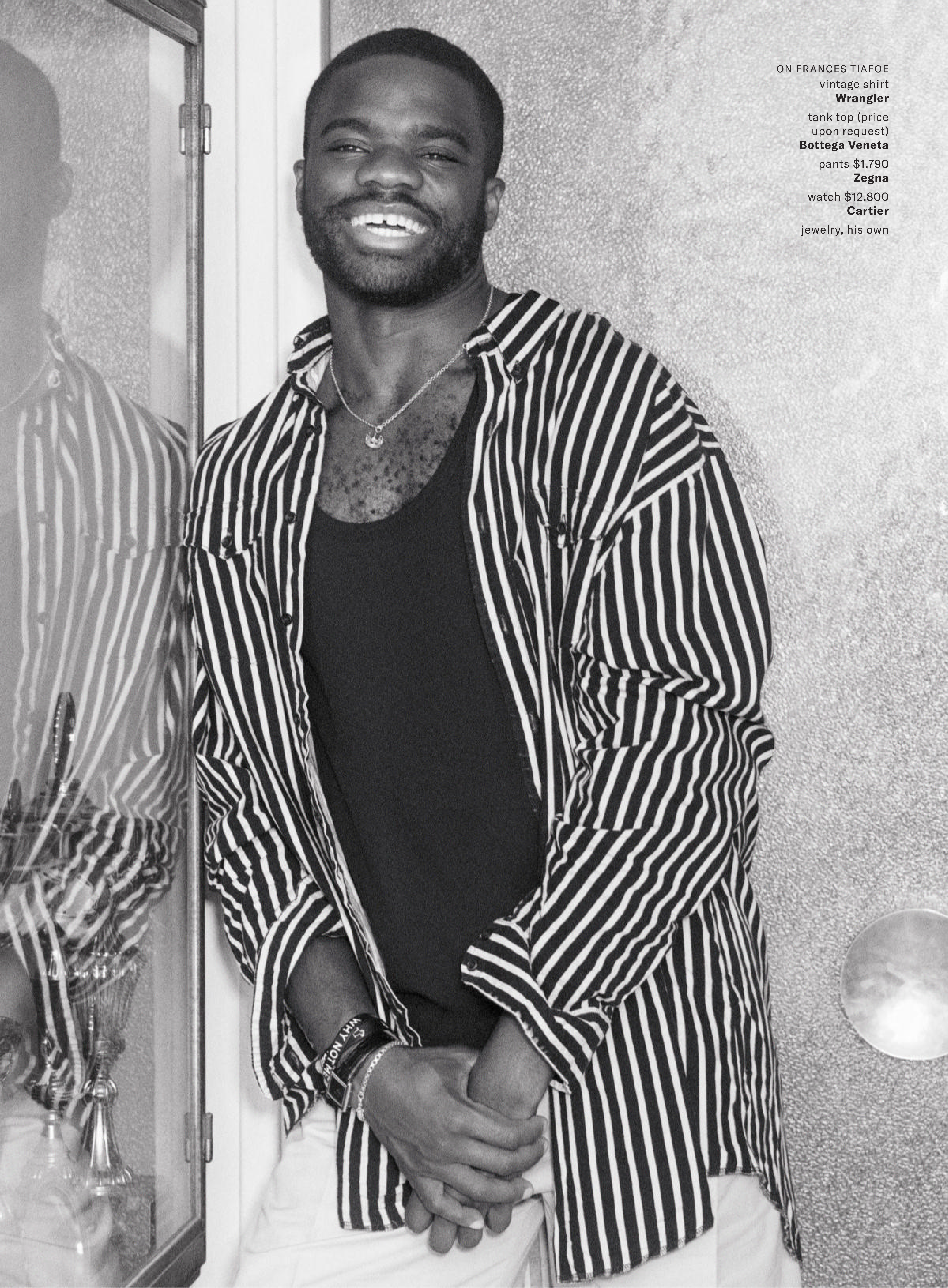
watch and jewelry, his own

Frances Tiafoe

(Opposite page) ❯

Nation: **USA**
Age: **25**

Some players melt under the bright lights of center court, especially during grand slams. Not Tiafoe, who provided one of the 2022 season's most indelible highlights when he defeated Rafael Nadal in front of 23,000 fans in the US Open round of 16. "I've always loved high-stakes moments," said Tiafoe. "I like being front and center." The child of immigrants from Sierra Leone, Tiafoe grew up playing at a tennis academy in Maryland where his father was on the maintenance staff; a young Tiafoe sometimes slept in his dad's office after beating balls against a wall for hours. Following the retirement of his friend Serena Williams, Tiafoe sees it as his duty to carry on the GOAT's mission. "I want to change the way the game's looked at. You get this, 'Tennis is posh, prissy, a country club sport'.... I want to bring some flavor to the game."



ON FRANCES TIAFOE
vintage shirt
Wrangler
tank top (price upon request)
Bottega Veneta
pants $1,790
Zegna
watch $12,800
Cartier
jewelry, his own

Stefanos Tsitsipas

›

Nation: **Greece**
Age: **24**

A phenom with wanderlust, Tsitsipas carries a handheld video camera everywhere he goes to record travel vlogs and posts his landscape photography on Instagram in between tennis clips. To a greater degree than most players, he keeps to himself. “I would love to have friends on tour,” he said. “I just don’t feel like I relate to a lot of them, in terms of how I approach life.” Before getting elbow surgery in late 2021 to deal with nagging pain, Tsitsipas wasn’t sure if his career would extend beyond his mid-20s. But he quickly returned to his top form, playing, as he said, “with lots of desire, with lots of passion, with lots of dexterity and no feeling of doubt—just pure me out on the court.”

→
ON STEFANOS
TSITSIPAS
coat $3,050
Versace

stylist’s
own tank top
Uniqlo

shirt $300
Our Legacy

pants $80
Adidas

boots (price
upon request)
Bottega Veneta

socks $490
Dior Men

Stefanos Tsitsipas

inside the world of pro golf, see page 60). The young players certainly see an upside to letting Netflix into their lives: "Hopefully, it can do for tennis what it did for F1," Fritz told me as a boom mic hovered a few feet above his head. Added Tiafoe, "How are we going to get younger fans to tune in? I think the game needs different faces and personalities to be shown."

Casper Ruud, a 24-year-old Norwegian forehand specialist who reached two major finals last year, pondered how much tennis has changed of late. "When I was younger and looked up to the best players on tour, there was a period where there was no teenager inside [the top 100] in the world rankings," he said. Now, there are two in the top 15, including Carlos Alcaraz, 19, the Spanish world number one, who downed Ruud in the final of last year's US Open.

What some younger players occasionally lack in maturity—the ATP is considering whether to raise fines to curb a spate of on-court tantrums—they make up for in their speed and shot making. "Everyone is getting physically stronger and harder to play," said Holger Rune, the second-most highly ranked teen, a week before he dispatched Djokovic with an ice-cold three-set comeback in the Paris Masters final. "We needed to get our asses kicked by them in order to learn and grow, and be much more complete in what we do," said Stefanos Tsitsipas, a philosophical 24-year-old from Athens with Björn Borg hair who routinely dives for otherwise untouchable drop shots and volleys.

"You can't just run around there and push it back," said Ruud, who plays like a one-man highlight reel, bending physics with angled forehands that are often hard to fathom. "There are 20 to 30 guys [on tour] that can produce incredible winners at an incredible level." Others have perfected tweeners and behind-the-back shots that rival the swaggiest NBA dunks, or brought back the surprise underhand serve—and even that tactical relic of the McEnroe years, the serve-and-volley. (If you thought aggressive net play was dead outside your local pickleball league, you haven't watched these guys play.) According to Rune, who was born in 2003: "It's like the old days."

Heading into this year's Australian Open, everyone would seem to be chasing Alcaraz, who's been billed as the second coming of Nadal. But most guys see the race to the top as an open field. "I don't see any of the new generation being as dominant," said Matteo Berrettini, a 26-year-old hunk from Italy who roared into the 2021 Wimbledon final with his booming forehand and crushing serve. One factor might be how hungry these guys are for hardware, and how fiercely they're training for it. In the Big Three era, high rankings were a coveted consolation prize for most players. "At first, I was that kid, like, *I want to be number one in the world*," Tiafoe told me. "Now, I just want to win a slam."

And with Federer having proved you can play into your 40s, some are making extra room in their trophy cases. "I feel the next generation will play as long as those guys are, if not more," said Félix Auger-Aliassime, a polished 22-year-old from Canada who trains in Monaco and has a taste for high fashion. The night before, he'd won the Swiss Indoors, his third tournament victory in as many weeks.

Aware that a historic opportunity is finally here, Auger-Aliassime is pacing himself. "I'm in it for the long game, staying calm, and not getting too excited when things are happening right now," he said. "I'm like, Okay, this is great, but I'm 22 and I'm going for a long career. This is just the beginning."

Taylor Fritz

(Opposite page) ❯

Nation: **USA**
Age: **25**

The SoCal native delivered one of American men's tennis's most heroic moments of the century at last year's Indian Wells tournament (the most prestigious non-slam on the calendar), when he defied his coaches' wishes and played on a bum ankle in the final against Rafael Nadal, beating him in a straight-set stunner. "That was probably one of the best, if not the best, moment in my life," said Fritz, whose mom was also a top-10 player. Now, along with Tiafoe, Fritz is his country's best hope for its first men's victory at a major since Andy Roddick in 2003. "I want to be the American to end the grand slam drought," he said. "I want to be the first one to do it. And I do feel like it's more reachable now than it's ever been."

→
ON TAYLOR FRITZ
jacket, vintage

tank top (price upon request)
Bottega Veneta

pants $711
Lanvin

sneakers $180
Nike x Sacai

watch, his own

Casper Ruud

(Following pages, left) ❯❯

Nation: **Norway**
Age: **24**

A second-generation pro who made two grand slam final appearances in 2022, Ruud is still adjusting to life as one of his generation's most elite players. It's a new status that's led to novel experiences, like attending New York Fashion Week—"I had no idea how long a fashion show would be!"—and realizing that, more often than not, he's the guy on court to beat. "It's always going to be tough, I think, to consider yourself a top player," the Norwegian said. "For the moment I'm still new, I'm still fresh to everything, and I have a lot to prove still. But when people are playing me, I hope that they maybe are a little bit afraid of the results that I have had in the last few years."

Holger Rune

(Following pages, right) ❯❯

Nation: **Denmark**
Age: **19**

Rune may still be a teenager, but he's already one of the fiercest competitors on tour. Days after this photo shoot, he KO'd Novak Djokovic in a come-from-behind blitz in the finals of the Paris Masters to win his biggest tournament yet, running through fellow teen sensation Carlos Alcaraz along the way. What separates Rune and other youngsters like Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner from the rest of the next-gen pack? "Mindset," Rune said. "The will to get better every day. And on court, even if you play bad, you dig deep, you find solutions, you do everything you can to win."

Taylor
Fritz

ON CASPER RUUD
jacket, vintage
shirt $750
Gucci
shorts $148
Polo Ralph Lauren
stylist's own
boxers and socks
Uniqlo
sneakers $470
Acne Studios

Thomas Sweet
RLT

ON HOLGER RUNE
coat $1,770
Husbands Paris

sweater $298
Polo Ralph Lauren

jacket (worn underneath) and hat, vintage

jeans $380
Our Legacy

boots $1,150
Dior Men

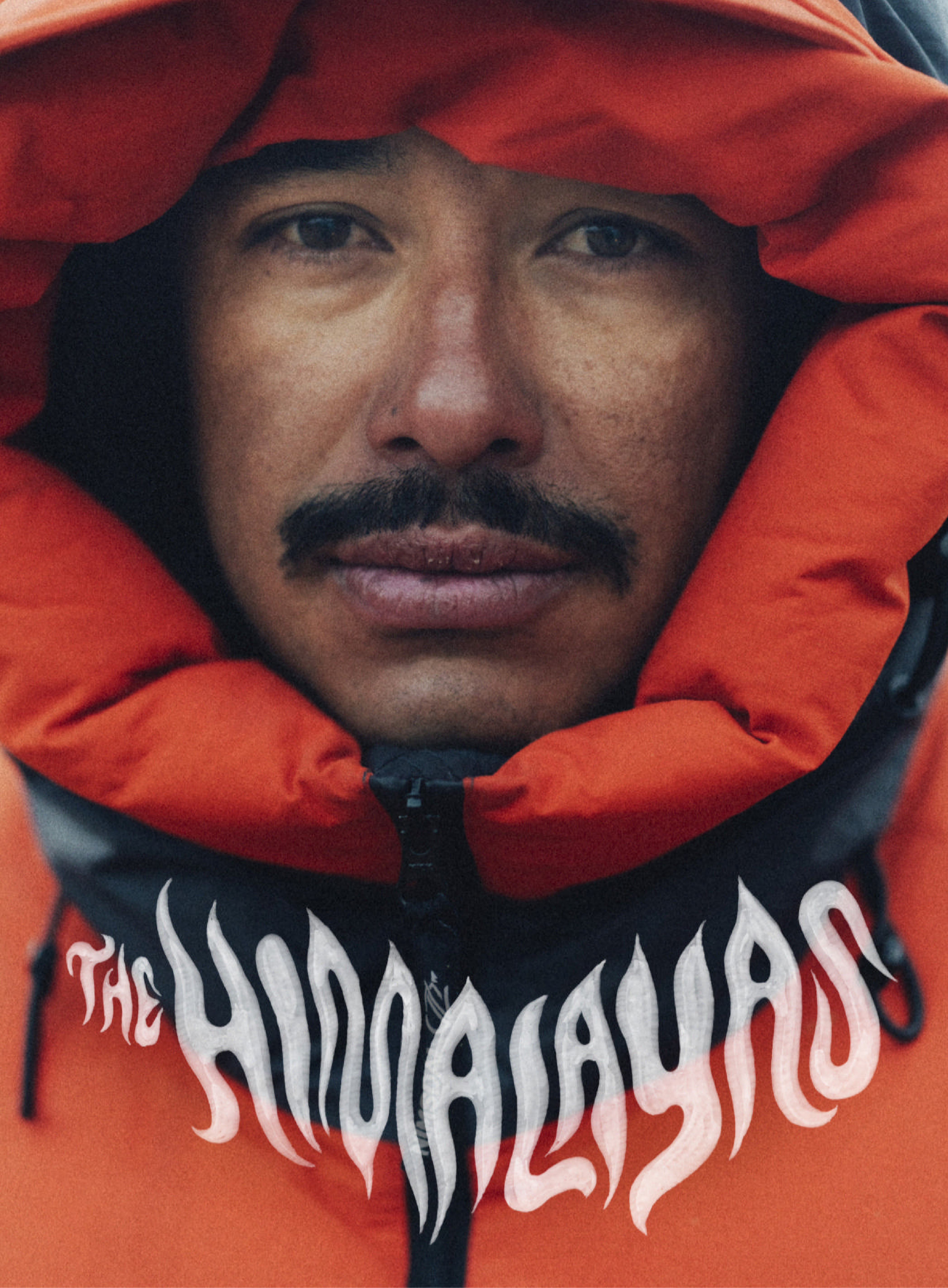
hair by alexander soltermann using bumble and bumble. grooming by karla garza. tailoring by anh duong. produced by wknd.

THE HYPE MAN OF

After scaling the 14 meanest mountains on earth in record time, Nepali-born Nims Purja emerged as a powerful champion of the country's Sherpa guides. He's also become the first celebrity mountaineer of the social media age—and the most controversial figure in the global climbing community.

By Grayson Schaffer

Photographs by AF Webb



THE HIMALAYAS

WHEN I strolled into base camp at Ama Dablam, the 22,349-foot peak known as the Matterhorn of the Himalayas, the mountaineer Nims Purja was locked in a fierce game of beach volleyball. Just beyond the court, in every direction, sprawled a village of tents, some 65 in all, erected by his guiding company, Elite Expeditions. The outfit is the ultra-ambitious Nims's latest gambit—a business meant to parlay his status as one of the world's most celebrated climbers into a venture that pays more than simply breaking mountaineering records. Perhaps more significantly, though, the Nepali-born Nims wants to use the company to upend the old paradigms of the Himalayan guiding industry by cutting the Sherpa guides in on the largesse. And as with anything Nims tries, he has launched it on a grandly immodest scale.

When I found him on the makeshift volleyball court, Nims and his Sherpa guides were taking on the kitchen crew and getting beaten. Still, it was immediately clear that the 39-year-old Nims is a gifted athlete. With his thin mustache, almond eyes, and black swooped hair, he resembles a Bollywood star. And despite standing only five feet seven, he was still able to spike the ball from above the net. The cook crew was spry, however, and kept sending it back, until finally the hitter behind Nims squibbed one into the latrine tent.

These days, it's a rare thing to see Nims face defeat. Over the past four years, the former Nepalese special forces soldier has electrified the climbing world and the wider culture beyond. He became mega-famous in 2019 by scaling all 14 of the world's 8,000-meter peaks in just six months and six days. After that inventive feat, his notoriety was multiplied by the releases of his book, *Beyond Possible,* and Netflix movie, *14 Peaks,* both of which helped confer a level of power on Nims that climbers seldom achieve. Now he's deciding how to wield that influence, both for himself and his Sherpa compatriots. He's aimed at nothing less than remaking the Himalayan guiding industry in his image—and along the way is raising questions about what it means to be a mountaineer in the age of the influencer.

Having arranged to meet Nims at his camp at the base of Ama Dablam, where he was leading his final Himalayan expedition of the year, I'd flown by helicopter from Kathmandu to the roadless Sherpa capital of Namche Bazaar, located at just over 11,000 feet. From there, it was a three-day walk up Nepal's Khumbu Valley to the tent city occupied by Elite Expeditions. Roughly two dozen clients had ponied up roughly $11,000 each to share a rope with one of Nims's Sherpa guides on the 25-day expedition, which would involve about a week of acclimatization followed by a grueling two-day summit push. In addition to Elite, there were a dozen or so other outfitters on the mountain, but the teams didn't mix. Like the fancy camps at Burning Man, Elite was roped off with tasteful signs advising "No entry."

Dominating camp were a pair of 30-foot-tall dome tents, inside which the climbers took their meals. At dinner that night, Nims sat at the head of a T-shaped banquet table in one of the two domes. He gave a weather report and dispensed customized summit plans for each client-Sherpa team from memory. He was surrounded by his patrons, among them several jovial, square-jawed British special-forces alums of the sort who now have successful life-hacking podcasts and large social media followings. Propane heaters purred, and a dozen of his climbers—the ones not currently acclimatizing higher up the mountain—sat noshing in comfortable armchairs.

There was Madison Loyola, an athletic 30-something with a successful manufacturing company. Kayla Perez, a private-jet flight attendant who'd googled "how to climb a mountain" early in the pandemic; now she was here. Michael Green was a Vancouver-based architect who'd figured out how to build timber skyscrapers and gave a TED talk about it, with over a million views.

After dinner, the Sherpas cranked up a local Nepali DJ named Badal and the scene phase-changed into a full-blown dance party. A fifth of rum appeared and Nims filled everyone's cups. Green, the architect, leaned over and assured me, "This is every night."

"I don't care what you do," Nims later said of his policy on both clients and employees getting turnt. "But next day if you can't operate, that's your fuckup."

Nims danced for a half-hour, dropping into thigh-crushing Cossack leg kicks at one point, and then settled into a chair with a mug. Earlier in the day he'd been irritated that a French climber had died during his descent, and that his outfitter hadn't called Nims to ask for help. "If only they had told my team, 'Could you give us a hand?' " Nims lamented, referring to the staff of 46 able-bodied men in camp. "I have such huge manpower here."

Nims typically has a knack for being near the center of the action. His photo of a traffic jam of hundreds of climbers queuing near Everest's summit in 2019 became an international news story, as were his many rescues of other climbers that same season. Last September, he organized the recovery of American ski mountaineer Hilaree Nelson's body after she died falling from the summit of Manaslu, the world's eighth-tallest peak.

But this time, there was nothing he could do. The guides had gotten the Frenchman off the mountain, but he expired before they could reach a waiting helicopter. The incident had prompted Nims to reflect on his own safety record.

"Thirty-two 8,000-meter expeditions, my brother," he boasted. "All summits. Brought everybody back home exactly the same way they left. Probably fitter and with a better mental attitude. No one in the world has got that track record. I say that with pride."

Nims projects the kind of confidence that isn't long suffered by these mountains. But what happens when someone does die? How would he respond to that?

"No one should die," Nims insisted. "There's no *What if?* bro." For Nims, this absolute belief seems less like denial than the daily affirmations of a man who makes Norman Vincent Peale look like a whiner. Nims has a lot of care for his clients and holds his Sherpa team in the highest regard. He believes he's carrying more than their safety on his back.

He nodded to the Sherpa guys still dancing. "I'm the fucking face of these people, bro," he said. "You'll see it everywhere in Kathmandu. I'm their hope now."

INDEED, HIS NAME was everywhere in Kathmandu, like a flickering signal resolving from the noise of interstellar static. A wobble in an orbit. A telltale shift in wavelength. A new and powerful force had taken hold here: Nimsdai. In sleek black sans serif on the hood of the custom white Land Rover that fetched me from Tribhuvan airport: Nimsdai.

Those same seven letters appeared above the glass-and-steel shopping pavilion annexed to the five-star Marriott that sprang up in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake, which killed nearly 9,000 Nepalis. Nimsdai is both the flagship mountaineering store above the Apple computer retailer in that square, and the diminutive Nepali call sign of the man whose name is

Previous page: Nims Purja at the base of Ama Dablam, a 22,349-foot Himalayan peak.

Opposite page: The scene at Nims's ultra lavish, 65-tent base camp.

ELITE EXPED
AMADABLAM EXPEDITION
(6812 m, 22,349 ft)

on every Himalayan climber's lips: Nirmal Purja a.k.a. Nims Purja a.k.a. Nimsdai.

It means "Brother Nims." He is family. He is a demigod. He is the second coming of Tenzing Norgay. Only this time, instead of politely supporting his Edmund Hillary, he takes the credit and razzes the best foreign climbers for drafting behind him and his Sherpa crew.

Though he is now in possession of a British passport, Nims was once a barefoot ethnic Magar kid, running in the sweltering streets of Chitwan, near the Indian border. He was one of those uniformed boarding-school boys walking arm-in-arm in the road, dressed in a striped tie and a blue cardigan. That was before he joined the Gurkhas, the legendary Nepali infantrymen established by the British Empire, and then, through sheer force of will, became the first Nepali elevated to the Special Boat Service, the Royal Navy's version of the SEALs. This, despite Nepal's nonexistent coastline.

Nims started out humble. The humility wore off. Like the punch line to that joke about how you know there's a Navy SEAL in the room: He tells you of his deeds, his world records, his daring rescues. He has compared himself to Muhammad Ali, Usain Bolt, Neil Armstrong, and Robin Hood, and speaks slogan-ese with a fluency that could reanimate Ron Popeil. *Achieve your new possible! Always a little higher! Giving up is not in the blood!* These and other phrases are printed on everything from coffee cups to the mission patches Nims velcros to the one-piece down summit suits worn by his mountaineer clients.

He says he's the CEO of nine companies, though he won't name them all. His book and movie are both autobiographical. The former, a best seller, reads like the kind of memoir written by American politicians who have suddenly taken to vacationing in Iowa. The latter, Nims says, was Netflix's most popular release of 2021. He gets consistent corporate speaking gigs, and his one-on-one guiding rate up Everest is more than a million dollars.

It's a lot. Nims is a lot. But his hustle and bravado are precisely the things that have allowed him to break into the mainstream from Nepal's deep bench of climbing talent. I've covered mountaineering and Sherpa culture on and off for more than a decade, and while there have always been insanely strong climbers with roots in Nepal, nobody has ever amassed the mind share, as the marketers say, that Nims has. In the process he's gathered a legion of devotees and plenty of critics, all of them hoping to cement his reputation as either a generational talent among high-altitude mountaineers or else a boastful self-promoter flying perilously close to the sun.

I found it impossible to escape these questions in Kathmandu as I prepared to go meet the man himself. At the airport, I made my way beneath the rotors of an AStar B3, noticing before I climbed aboard that it was wrapped in now familiar black lettering: Nimsdai.

THE HELI PUT ME down in Namche Bazaar, which sits in an airy amphitheater of hillside high above the confluence of the Dudh Kosi and Bhote Koshi rivers. From a ridgeline above town, I could see Ama Dablam—"mother's necklace"—a granite pinnacle adorned with a hundred-ton pendant of ice near its western crown. Farther in the background rises the squat pyramid of Everest, at 29,032 feet. Chomolungma, as the Sherpas call it, isn't the prettiest, but it's so high that it juts into the jet stream and makes a rooster tail in the stratosphere, like it's clawing at space itself.

> **"My biggest thing was how to make this clear-cut to the rest of the world, where the evidence speaks that the Nepalese climbers are the best."**

Walking the dusty trail beside these mountains produces a kind of vertigo of naked scale. They follow you the way the moon does—Thamserku, Taboche, Cholatse. The path feels stationary, like a treadmill. For most of us, Himalayan peaks merely inspire awe. But to an unfortunate subset of climbers, they're as irresistible as a wobbly bookcase is to a toddler. The tallest 14 of the world's summits, through a chance intersection of geology and the metric system, are known as the 8,000'ers. Above 8,000 meters—about 26,000 feet—your body can no longer adapt to the thinness of the air. This is the Death Zone. You can't stay here long.

It was on these 14 peaks—all of them located in the Himalayan uplift in the border regions of Nepal, Tibet, and Pakistan—that Nims first blew minds. He'd first begun climbing at altitude in 2012, at the age of 29, and four years later reached the summit of Everest as an anonymous client while on leave from the Gurkhas. Then, in 2019, having previously climbed only four of the Death Zone peaks, Nims summited all 14 in just six months and six days. He called it Project Possible, because people who know about such things told him it couldn't be done. The previous record was a brisk but sensible seven years—one expedition in each of the spring and fall climbing seasons, between the monsoons and the frigid winter.

Bagging Himalayan peaks as if they were day-trip outings was unheard of. The movie Nims shot and produced debuted on Netflix in November 2021 and elevated Nims and his Sherpa team to social media celebrity status. The film also generated huge international publicity for Elite Expeditions. By mid-2022 Nims had over 2 million followers on Instagram. He also had a client list that he said included numerous billionaires, whose names he won't reveal, and one Qatari princess, Asma Al Thani, who appears frequently in his feed.

On the way to meet Nims, I sent a WhatsApp message to Garrett Madison, an American outfitter on Ama Dablam that fall, letting him know that I was coming. "Just visited Nims's camp today," Madison replied. "Only three models this time 😂." Was Madison worried that Nimsdai and his Elite Expeditions would swallow up the entire Himalayan guiding industry? Not quite. It's a "different vibe," Madison responded. "Interesting 'new market' of clientele. Not my competition, so all good. A rising tide lifts all boats."

THE MODELS MADISON was referring to were known collectively as the @SwissAlpineGirls. When I rolled into base camp, they were with another Elite detachment over on Lobuche East, a nearby 6,100-meter peak that Nims often advises novices to tackle as their first Himalayan ascent. Among the other clients on Lobuche were Andrew Clayton, a 41-year-old Brit, and Andrew Shaw, who calls himself a "well-being engineer." Nims's appeal seems especially strong among the aesthetically inclined, probably due in part to his outsize digital footprint.

But if the social media set was drawn to Nims, the climbing world wasn't sure what to do with him. Mountaineers knew that Nims had accomplished something significant, but they couldn't agree on what exactly that was. He had used some of the accoutrements frowned upon by purists, including bottled oxygen and fixed ropes, and had a team of Sherpas guide him in the way that a pace line of seasoned *domestiques* slices through wind resistance for the yellow jersey at the Tour de France.

Krzysztof Wielicki, the legendary Polish mountaineer who in 1980 became the first to climb Everest in winter, told a Polish radio station, "It's more of a statistical achievement," adding that the feat would not be "written into the history of alpine climbing."

He felt that others had summited the 14 peaks in a far more impressive fashion, among them the South Tyrolean great Reinhold Messner, now 78, who achieved the feat in 16 years without fixed ropes or bottled oxygen, and the late Pole Jerzy Kukuczka, who pulled it off in eight years and used oxygen only on Everest. "It is light-years short of Kukuczka and Messner's class," Wielicki said of Nims's Project Possible.

At night, Nims's Ama Dablam base camp often turns into a disco. The mountaineer has a simple policy on boozing at altitude: "Next day if you can't come and operate, that's your fuckup."

But he failed to grasp the significance of Nims's innovation, like the guy who stands in front of a Pollock and says, "My kid could do that." Filmmaker and climber Jimmy Chin points out that while it *is* a logistical feat, "It's way more than that.… You still have to climb the mountains"—often in bad weather.

The fact is, before Nims did it in 189 days, nobody had even considered attempting a fastest known time (FKT) on the 8,000'ers. It was a feat of creativity as much as raw physical talent, and it changed the way people view these mountains. Climbers now routinely attempt multiple 8,000-meter peaks in a season.

Non-climbers sometimes struggle to comprehend the nuances of what makes certain routes difficult. But they do understand a story. And that's what Nims gave them. It's neither alpinism nor speed climbing but something altogether new. He called it, unsurprisingly, "Nims style." It's less an unknown runner turning in a sub-two-hour marathon than somebody with a healthy appetite and determination realizing that they can wipe out the buffet at Bob's Big Boy. It's a spectacle. It's a campaign. It's *because it's there.*

One person who was deeply affected by Nims's new benchmark was a bubbly, dreadlocked 36-year-old skier and runner from Norway named Kristin Harila. Though she hadn't climbed a single 8,000'er before 2021, last year she decided to break Nims's record. After stacking up sponsors, she hired a manager, and was guided by Sherpas Dawa Ongju and Pasdawa. In late September, with 12 peaks down, Harila was comfortably outpacing Nims, but the Chinese government wouldn't give her a permit to climb Shishapangma and Cho Oyu. That ended her run. It was, in fact, logistics that defeated her. She plans to try again in 2023.

But while Nims's feats have inspired some, his particular communication style really fires up critics. In the book and movie, as much as in conversation, Nims routinely lapses into one-liners and aphorisms as if his life were in fact a screenplay. During an early rescue in *14 Peaks,* he shouts, "Giving up is not in the blood!" which has become his catchphrase. It's on a T-shirt. He makes extraordinary claims that are difficult to confirm, which produces skepticism in any rational person receiving his story.

At times, Nims has lashed out at reporters for questioning his version of events or attempting to learn about his expeditions without passing through him first. Explorersweb, a small but committed online journal about mountaineering, is among the few to attempt to verify Nims's claims. "Your information has always been crap," he wrote on Instagram last May after a reporter questioned whether he and Qatari princess Asma Al Thani had started a climb from Camp Two instead of base camp. (Nims says they hadn't.) The irony is that, as a media property, Nims far outstrips any of the climbing publications that would seek to cover him. And since he insists on controlling the narrative, the only source for info on Nims's capers ends up being Nims himself.

"My story, I didn't ever want it to be told by anyone else, because that will never do it justice," he told me.

Take, for example, the time he was shot by a sniper in Afghanistan. "I tasted the warm, metallic tang of blood in my mouth," Nims writes in *Beyond Possible.* "A puddle of red grew around me on the floor. For a split second I worried half my face had been shredded away, though I didn't feel any pain." Then he discovers that the bullet struck his rifle, not his face, and that he is fine. Still, the puddle of blood! Nims has no obvious scars on his face, and the Royal Navy doesn't comment on such matters. It's not that it couldn't have happened exactly the way he wrote it. But it's the type of facile twist that feels too cute for real life, like a sheriff's badge stopping a bullet in a Western.

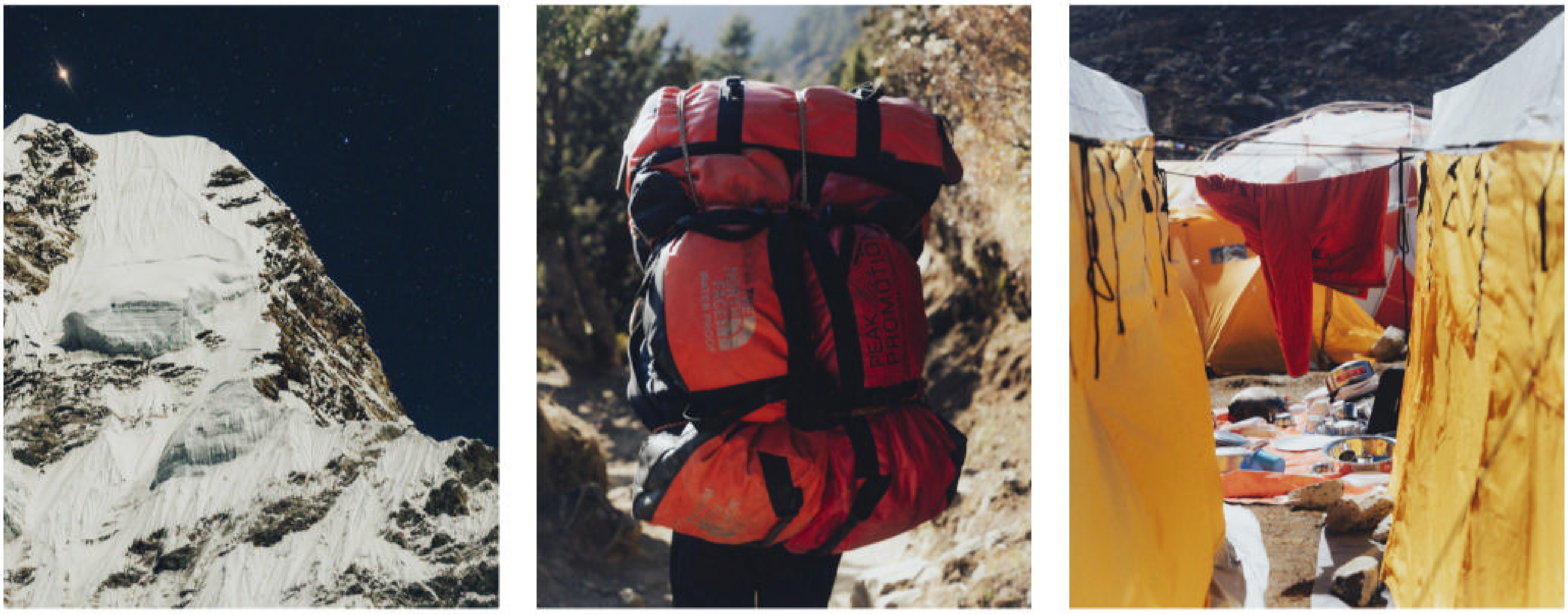
Nims's story is full of these pulpy bits. Like when, as a child, he tests himself by swimming across a river near Chitwan and realizes he hasn't reserved any stamina to get back (straight out of *Gattaca*), or when he discovers he's out of shape at Annapurna and trains with boulders (*Rocky IV*).

But Nims has an ace in the hole: The man whose achievements in the mountains are the standard by which all others are judged; the unimpeachable arbiter of high-altitude cred, who deflated poseurs for using oxygen and set the timeless benchmark for the ethics of alpinism with his 1971 essay “The Murder of the Impossible”; the South Tyrolean hardman whose deeds were so far ahead of his time that he, too, was doubted as a fabulist. Reinhold Messner has emerged as Nims’s biggest booster.

“Some climbers criticized Nirmal, but I didn’t understand why,” says Messner in *14 Peaks*. “He was doing it in this way, otherwise it’s not possible in such a short time.”

Game recognize game.

IN CASE WE’RE not clear on this, doing the impossible gives adventure bros a boner. It’s tied up in old ideas of masculinity and validation. The problem is that the big obvious firsts—climbing the tallest mountain, visiting the bottom of the ocean, discovering America—have all been done. And it turns out that with proper training and modern gear, most impossible feats become merely difficult.



From left: The peak of Ama Dablam, known as the Matterhorn of the Himalayas; trekking from the town of Namche Bazaar into the mountains; a balmy day at Ama Dablam base camp.

And so they equivocate, aggregate, elongate, and accelerate settled business until it once again seems to qualify as virgin territory. The relatively mild Seven Summits—climbing the tallest peak on each continent—was invented by Texas entrepreneur Dick Bass in 1985. Messner’s 1987 book *All 14 Eight-Thousanders* chronicled a 16-year campaign through the Death Zone. Project Possible was in this vein: audacious but what the reviewers at *Pitchfork* might call derivative work.

Nims is sensitive to criticism. He reads the comments. And rather than try to defend his achievement, he set his sights on a new one for late 2020. There’s a single, glaringly obvious prize in mountaineering that has rebuffed the world’s finest climbers since it was first attempted in 1987: climbing K2 in winter. If Project Possible was a cool trick, this was climbing’s sub-two-hour marathon, 62 homers in the post-steroid era, GOAT-level stuff.

“I knew I had to do this for the country,” Nims said, “for the people, and only I could do it the right way.”

At 8,611 meters, the world’s second-highest peak—just 237 meters shorter than Everest—was the only 8,000’er still unclimbed between mid-December and mid-March. That’s because the Karakoram, eight degrees latitude north—think southern New England versus Florida—puts the Savage Mountain in a different league entirely. Not only is it colder and more difficult to climb even in mild weather, but during winter the temperature and barometric pressure at the summit mean that, atmospherically speaking, it has a similar altitude density as Everest. As far as a climber’s lungs and physiology are concerned, both mountains have a perceived altitude of around 9,100 meters in January.

Teams had been hunting winter K2 for decades, but 2021 was a particularly tricky time because of the pandemic. On top of that, Nims had to assemble a new team. Some of the Sherpas had left the team after Project Possible. Nims thinks other local outfitters poached his talent, telling them, “Why only Nims is famous? Why are you not famous?” he told me. “It really hurt.” Nims thought they were on board with a supporting role, but ultimately the story had been too much *Lone Survivor* and not enough *Band of Brothers*. (The subtitle of *Beyond Possible* is “One Man, 14 Peaks, and the Mountaineering Achievement of a Lifetime.”)

“Look, even if I didn’t have the team from Project Possible, I would still have made it. If today I chose five completely different guys, I could make it, because [the task] needs leadership,” Nims said. “Ninety-nine percent of the Sherpas are at the same level.

“You need to convince people—to give them that inner energy,” he went on. “That’s when you become extraordinary. And that’s what I did for K2 winter. I said, ‘Guys, I’m going in. Do you want to come?’ And some of them said no.”

But Mingma David was still ride-or-die. Geljen, another Sherpa, was game. Nims assembled a team of six, including Mingma Tenzi, a world-beating climber with nearly thirty 8,000-meter summits under his belt, and Pemchhiri and Dawa Temba, both fully accredited international guides with about 20 Everest ascents between them. Along with two cooks, a swarm of Pakistani porters, and their base camp manager, they set off from Skardu, Pakistan, on December 21, 2020. As they rolled out, Nims cautioned reporters about dishing “from the comfort of their warm couch at home.” On Instagram he wrote: “You don’t know anything about my plans, and you will never know unless I want you to!”

AS A TEAM, Nims's K2 squad was stacked with Sherpas, just like the crews that had come before them. As early as the 1922 British expedition of Everest, Westerners relied on Sherpas for support. Seven of them died on the job during that first outing a hundred years ago. While it's since become vogue for the best foreigners to climb without Sherpa support, the innovative wrinkle on Nims's trip was that it involved Sherpas climbing without Western oversight. It's been a long time coming.

While universally loved, and admired for their strength, work ethic, and commitment to helping foreigners reach the tallest summits, Sherpas tend to get mentioned in the collective sense even when their accomplishments are utterly singular. Achievements are casually diluted, attributed to evolutionary adaptations for handling their homeland's dizzying altitudes.

From left: Nims surveys the scene at base camp; a mule carrying supplies on the trail in Nepal's Khumbu region; climbers picking out snacks ahead of their ascent.

Ethnic Sherpas migrated into the Khumbu region from Tibet about 600 years ago. Their language is spoken, not written, so there are no classic Sherpa memoirs or histories other than oral ones. The community was tiny, subsisting on potatoes grown on terraces scratched into some of the planet's most challenging farmland. Like many ethnicities in Nepal, they use *Sherpa* as a surname. And most Sherpa given names—regardless of gender—are days of the week: Dawa, Mingma, Lakpa, Phurba, Pasang, Pemba, Ngima.

The net effect is that a Sherpa phone book would be the most useless document of all time. Mingma Gyabu Sherpa was a star on the Travel Channel's 2016 series *Everest Air,* where as a 27-year-old he performed 52 rescues in a single season. He noticed the phone book problem as he was trying to raise his profile. "All of the people had the same name," he told me. "And I'm trying to find a [new] name. I added the middle name David. After that, I was easier to recognize."

The story of Mingma David could be the story of any climbing Sherpa in Nepal. He was born in 1989 in Lelep, in the Taplejung district on the slopes of Kanchenjunga. When he was 17 he got a job as a porter. He carried two foreigners' trekking bags, weighing a total of nearly 70 pounds, despite being just 120 pounds himself. "It's a lot," said Mingma David, wincing. "I cried a lot." For his trouble, he was paid 300 rupees per day, about $4.15. In 2009, he landed a job as a kitchen helper at Manaslu base camp. For that trip he got a 10,000-rupee ($134) gear stipend and 800 rupees ($11) per day.

By 2010, at age 21, he was ready to climb. "I did two trainings in Kathmandu," Mingma David explained. "A seven-day basic introductory training and seven days of rescue technique. And straight to Everest."

A local outfitter gave him about $1,600 as a gear stipend. His pay was still 800 rupees per day, but he made an additional $500 if he reached the summit with a client, which he did on his first attempt. Not long after, his uncle Dorjee Khatri wanted him to meet "that military guy" he'd been guiding. This, of course, was Nims.

"We started talking and chatting, and then we became close friends," recalled Mingma David. They crossed paths at the South Col of Everest in 2016, when Nims went for his first summit, though it wasn't until 2018 that they climbed together for the first time. It's here that Mingma David's story diverges from the ordinary.

During those years, Sherpas typically made about $6,000 per Everest climbing season. It's a bit more today. When Nims decided to get into the guiding business, he began to pay his top guides up to $70,000 a year—more in line with what foreign guides are paid—and in the case of Mingma David, and later Mingma Tenzi, offer them a combined 25 percent equity stake in Elite Expeditions. Sherpas living in Nepal already do well by local standards. The tourism industry, which was projected to bring in about $300 million in 2022, has always been a bright spot in the country's subsistence economy, but earning deep into six figures is life changing. "Me and Nims, we are never talking about money, because we built this company together," said Mingma David, who handles personnel, while Nims drums up clients and investment.

Two people I spoke with who have a long history in Nepal's climbing industry told me that they wonder about Nims's possible profit margins with such lavish base camps and highly paid staff, while also charging thousands less than some other outfitters (unless, of course, you want Nims himself as your guide). In Nims's book, he describes working with a business partner—"an anonymous accomplice"—to contact a series of potential investors.

Perhaps as important as the money is the democratization of certain star-making tools now available to everyone. For instance, Mingma David has his own social media brand, which makes it impossible to lump him together with other Sherpas as "the help." This is the biggest thing Nims has changed; he's shifted the gravity in the room so the Sherpas in his orbit are holding the biggest megaphone.

Instead of only supporting foreign climbers' ambitions, they're forming dream teams to dunk on these mountains themselves. They're flying their own drones and shooting their own movies. Sponsors have ponied up. Fanbois flock to them online. These guys aren't trying to get sponsored by the North Face team—they're directly challenging the North Face team. There's no going back.

Interestingly, multiple people have pointed out that Nims isn't actually a Sherpa himself, and is a British citizen. (Nepal doesn't allow dual citizenship.) *The New York Times* even pointed this out. But it feels like an unfair attempt to rob Nims of his origin story because he left, had success in the UK, and found his way to the climbing community as a client rather than a porter. So I asked him point-blank: Does he consider himself a Sherpa?

"Yes," he said. "Sherpa is not a caste, it's a brand. It's also an ethnic group, and a climbing community." The distinction he's making is one that flows directly out of 20th-century colonialism, according to which all porters on early British Himalayan expeditions were aggregated as "sherpas," regardless of ethnicity, and all porters addressed their clients as "sahib," or sir. As a result, the former term, when spelled with a lowercase *s,* still refers to a job title. In fact, many of the sherpas on British expeditions were lowlanders from a mix of ethnic groups, including the one Nims hails from.

In his biography of Tenzing Norgay, British writer Ed Douglas notes that "Sherpas are the most famous mountain tribe in the world, with an immediate advantage over other ethnic groups in Nepal.... Until recently, all kinds of tribes adjacent to the Sherpas would adopt the name 'Sherpa' to boost their prospects of employment."

Nims shares the sentiment but doesn't appear to view it as appropriation. "If you look into the history of climbing, Magar were some of the first to climb with the British expeditions," said Nims. "Now Tamang are climbing; Rai are climbing." It's the mantle of the underdog that Nims has assumed, even though he's no longer the underdog. "That is my identity," Nims proclaimed. "*I* define my identity."

K2 BASE CAMP, deep in the Pakistani Karakoram, was a mosh pit of humanity when Nims and his guys set up their camp in late December 2020. Not only were three sprawling teams there but two of them had even signed up commercial clients for what would surely be a nasty and perilous undertaking.

The pandemic had shut down the spring and summer seasons across the Himalayas, and about 85 stir-crazy hardmen were eager to make questionable life choices on the standard Abruzzi Spur route. In addition to Nims's, there were two other Sherpa teams, one from Imagine Nepal and the other from Seven Summit Treks, who'd arrived earlier in the month.

Because of the valuable prize at stake, inter-team meetings had an air of gamesmanship. "We were competing against everyone," said Nims. "I was like, 'Hey, guys. You think you are really good? Why you want to know our plans?' "

During their first acclimatization rotation, Nims proposed an alliance with Mingma G from Imagine Nepal. "I said, 'Bro, why you want to compete?' " Nims recounted. "You got three guys, and I'm a team of six. Rather than having all this rivalry between the same Nepalese team, why don't we work together?' "

Then the three returned to base camp to recuperate, which on Planet Nims means only one thing. "After the plan, we make party," said Mingma Tenzi. "All-night party."

"We finished more than 12 bottles of whiskey," said Nims. "That's the first time I threw up." Here the extreme cold came in handy, as Nims was able to simply toss the frozen barf brick from his tent the following morning.

Climbers watching from afar paid close attention. Among them was respected German climber Ralf Dujmovits, who on December 28 took to Instagram to warn that K2 might be brought low by mountaineering's ultimate performance-enhancing drug. "I would find it a real pity if someone steals the first winter ascent of K2 by using supplemental oxygen," he wrote. "The general public might see this 'conquering' of K2 as a great feat, but the first winter ascent should be left to those who can do it by fair means."

Opposite page: In 2021, Nims became the first person to ever summit K2 in winter, and he did it without bottled oxygen.

Interestingly, when Krzysztof Wielicki subdued Everest in winter, back in 1980, he'd used bottled oxygen and nobody tried to discredit him. Indeed, by the standard of Dujmovits (and many other alpinists), Everest has seen only a single winter ascent by fair means. That was when Ang Rita Sherpa, known as the Snow Leopard, did it with little fanfare on December 22, 1987, while guiding a Korean climber. Ang Rita was easily the strongest and most prolific high-altitude climber of the late-20th century, but his talents were always in support of others. He died humbly in 2020, at age 72, after suffering a stroke in 2017 probably due to complications from his many years at altitude.

Between New Year's and the second week of January, the weather was abominable. Then came a report that a climbing window might open up after January 13. Nims gathered up his ad hoc team, which now included Mingma G and the latter's two Sherpa compatriots, Dawa Tenjin and Kilu Pemba. Additionally, they'd recruited Sona Sherpa from Seven Summit Treks. Nims had strategized not just against the mountain but against the remaining teams—and the detractors he knew would be watching from home.

"My biggest thing was how to make this clear-cut to the rest of the world, where the evidence speaks that the Nepalese climbers are the best," said Nims. He didn't just want to put himself on the summit and call it good. He'd been chastened by the hard feelings after his 14 Peaks project. No, he wanted to show the utter dominance of the Nepali climbers as a unit. They'd climb together and summit as a team. The only way Nims knew he could enforce the gentleman's agreement was if he stayed near the front of the pack.

And, in order to confound the other climbers in base camp, Nims wanted to launch for the peak from well below Camp Four, the usual departure point for a summit push. "That's why I changed the whole strategy, brother," explained Nims. "I planned to climb from Camp Three so nobody could follow us."

Lastly, there was the issue of climbing style. The team had always planned to use oxygen, but Nims had other ideas and tried to have others join him in his temperance. Mingma David recalled being a little shocked when Nims told him that one or two people from their team would need to climb without oxygen. "He tried to convince me, 'Mingma, you want to do without oxygen?' He tried hard, and I said no." Mingma David was a veteran of several K2 expeditions. He knew what lay ahead.

At that point, Nims knew that he'd have to be the one to try without oxygen. He told only Mingma David and Mingma Tenzi of his plan. They left base camp on January 13. By 2:30 a.m. on the night of January 15, they were at Camp Three ready to launch. Mingma Tenzi took the lead with Imagine Nepal's Dawa Tenjin belaying him as he fixed pitch after pitch of rope above Camp Four. Nims and Mingma David stayed just behind the leaders, passing them rope as they needed it. Mingma Tenzi was a force, pounding snow stakes, wrenching ice screws, fastening length after length. They were 10 of the strongest mountaineers in history, all pulling toward their own goal, with no clients to slow them down.

Just before 5 p.m. local time on January 16, Mingma Tenzi finished his heroic push. The men grouped up and then, while singing the Nepali national anthem and walking arm in arm, they knocked the bastard off. Nims, of course, was holding the selfie stick. *(continued on page 84)*

PHANTOM

THE HYPE MAN OF THE HIMALAYAS

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THE CLIMBING WORLD was in shock. The Nepalis had gone up the mountain, and suddenly there was a post on Nims's social channels announcing victory by all 10 of them. Not only had they succeeded but they'd made it look kinda easy. The post was uploaded by Nims's base camp manager, Ashok Rai, after Nims radioed down from the summit. He couldn't have anyone scoop him. After that, he went dark. The team still needed to make it off the mountain, as the sun was setting.

Forty-eight hours after summiting, Nims posted the summit picture and made his big reveal: He'd climbed the mountain without oxygen. No, he told me, he hadn't used it in his tent or while he slept or on the descent.

"His capacity and ability at that altitude has to be superhuman," Jimmy Chin later told me.

Nims's foils were incredulous, and his insistence on controlling the narrative may have fueled their doubts. To compound the tension, five climbers—Sergi Mingote, Juan Pablo Mohr, John Snorri, Ali Sadpara, and Atanas Skatov—all died on the mountain before the winter season was finished. Onlookers surmised that Nims's team had cut the fixed ropes as they descended so nobody could follow them. Nims stayed silent.

But when climbers returned to the mountain the following summer, the Sherpas' ropes were still fixed all the way to the summit. "Thank God," said Nims. "Mother Nature speaks. The people who died were still attached to the rope."

Denis Urubko, the veteran Russian-Polish alpinist who climbed the 14 peaks without oxygen and notched the first winter ascents of both Gasherbrum II and Makalu, was the most outspoken. "The press often buys shit because it looks like chocolate," Urubko told Explorerweb. "I saw his pictures and the summit video. It is impossible to be like that on K2's summit without oxygen. Least of all to keep pace with a crew of climbers on oxygen."

Notably, when Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler claimed the first ascent of Everest without oxygen in 1978—taking a mere eight hours to ascend from Camp Four, and only 45 minutes to descend—none other than Tenzing Norgay told Reuters that he didn't believe them. Climbers on oxygen typically take 12 to 14 hours on the way up. "Some experts," Habeler later wrote, believed that the two alpinists "had allowed a sniff of [oxygen], at least at intervals."

Chin has no problem accepting Nims's claims. "They had an opportunity to show the world what they're actually capable of when they were climbing for themselves," he said, adding, "It's arguably the most difficult winter ascent ever done. And they did it in a style that was very respectable." If Nims was lying, there are nine men who would have seen the telltale hose running from his face mask into his jacket. If there is a conspiracy, nine men would have to maintain it.

When I met with Nims at his base camp in November, he was still fuming at Urubko. "Bro, why are you even saying that?" he grumbled to me. "You're just lowering yourself. You will see in the movie, 'cause everything is documented. Your extreme is my normal."

* * *

DURING MY TIME with Nims, I found him to be charming and charismatic. I watched him manage the ambitions of his two dozen clients while also juggling logistics and a wife and young daughter back home in Britain.

Nims is at the point where the greatest risks to his success—falling into a crevasse notwithstanding—are of his own making. The three l's of billionaire Charlie Munger's warning to successful people—liquor, ladies, and leverage—all appeared to be in plentiful supply. There was the steady flow of attractive influencers moving through camp, the nightly rum-fueled dance party, and the high stakes of launching an outfitter and quickly growing it to scale. The temptation for somebody like Nims is to start believing in his own myth.

Though their stories are wildly different, the latter years of the most famous climber Nepal has ever produced, Tenzing Norgay, may offer a cautionary tale. Tenzing was fabulously unprepared for the level of global fame he met with upon his return from Everest in 1953. In the aftermath, he became the face of all Nepali people, revered by millions. He was the director of a climbing school in Darjeeling and met thousands of fans alongside Mickey Mantle at home plate in Yankee Stadium. Tenzing had three wives and seven children and wasn't always faithful. "Towards the end of his life," Douglas wrote in *The Guardian* after Norgay's death, "Tenzing had struggled with loneliness and alcoholism."

Recently, Nims has had a string of what he hopes is just bad luck. On September 21, when he turned on his phone after landing in Kathmandu to begin the fall guiding season, he learned that there had been a fire at the offices of Elite Expeditions, in the residential Kapan neighborhood of Kathmandu. Three of his staff died: Ashok Rai, the base camp manager from K2; Karsang Tenjing Sherpa, who was Mingma David's brother; and their liaison officer Tsewang Sherpa. They'd been storing highly flammable oxygen cylinders in the office, which exploded, but the cause of the fire is still under investigation.

Among the businesses Nims is starting is a school for skydiving, skills honed in his 10 years as a special forces operator. But about a month after the fire, on October 14, while training with professional skydiver Dean Waldo in Spain, the two became entangled during a training exercise. Waldo was above and behind Nims, and punched through Nims's parachute, becoming trapped in the fabric about 3,500 feet up. Nims cut away his primary chute and landed safely with his reserve, but Waldo cratered and died. All of this occurred only two weeks before our meeting.

"I'm one of those extreme athletes right now who have seen more death than anybody else in the world," he said. "So yeah, somehow I have got this ability to be able to box things off and then move on."

* * *

AT BREAKFAST ON the second morning at Ama Dablam base camp, Nims picked up the radio to talk to Madison Loyola, who'd just reached the summit. Through the plastic window of the giant dome, we could just make out the antlike dots of climbers on the final push to the top. "It's so beautiful," said Loyola. "I'm crying frozen tears."

"There's no such thing as bad weather," Nims radioed back as an affirmation. "Only bad effort." (He might need to workshop that one before printing it on a shirt.)

I shared a helicopter back to Kathmandu with several of Nims's clients, including Agnes Fischer, one of the @SwissAlpineGirls. She'd climbed Lobuche East but had been battling a stomach bug and decided not to climb Ama Dablam with her friends. That evening I met her and a couple of Nims's other clients at the Marriott bar for drinks. The room features high ceilings and a tall bookcase full of expensive-looking magnums.

Suddenly, Fischer was staring at her phone with a hand over her mouth. Somebody named Andrew had just died on Lobuche, she said. He was one of Nims's Elite Expedition clients, maybe one she'd met. A few seconds later Nims texted her. "Can you not tell people before it comes from official plz," he texted.

Andrew turned out to be Andrew James Clayton, the 41-year-old Brit. He'd felt sick while going for the summit, and his Sherpa guide walked him back down to camp. Later that afternoon, he was offered an evacuation by helicopter. Instead, Clayton entered his tent, fell asleep, and never woke up. "It was a reminder that we're not invincible," said Nims weeks later. "I'm just extremely sorry that it happened under the banner of Elite Exped." But he will do everything in his power to prevent loss of life in the short run. Like during *14 Peaks,* after he'd mortgaged his house to fund the project and still stopped to rescue other climbers. "I risked my summit chances on Dhauligiri," said Nims. "I risked the mission of climbing all 14 peaks."

Nims has seen so much death in his career that his view of it isn't like yours or mine. And he isn't about to start second-guessing his purpose just because he's suffered a client casualty. "Death is certain once you are born," said Nims.

He was calling from LA, where he was doing some motivational speaking. He was already looking ahead to 2023, when he would be guiding thirteen of the fourteen 8,000-meter peaks, including Everest. Soon he would be back in the mountains, leading clients, rescuing victims, sparring with rivals, and scripting the next chapter of his mythos. You can almost see him squinting into the sun as he delivers his final line: "I must continue my journey because I have a bigger goal."

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DEION SANDERS ENTERS HIS
PRIME

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assistant, Sam Morini, and the three of us set out for lunch. The rumors of Sanders's departure had been building all fall, and the possible destinations were coming into focus: South Florida, Colorado, Auburn, Georgia Tech, Nebraska.

We pulled up next to a red-brick two-story building that houses Johnny T's Bistro & Blues, Sanders's favorite restaurant and nearly daily lunch spot. The downstairs dining room at Johnny T's was dim, with dark furnishings. Most of the light came from TVs. The undeniable smell of soul food and brown liquor seeped into every inch of the space. It was an unusual lunch pick, I thought, for someone who famously doesn't drink.

We headed to the very back, to a small area cordoned off by iron rails and lit by a warm glow of spotlights. We took our seats at a table with small placard on top that read "Coach Prime."

The chef emerged from the kitchen and greeted Sanders like an old friend. He took his order personally without a menu—a turkey burger and a coffee. The rest of the diners ate catfish, pork chops, and turkey wings. My order of pork chops with rice and gravy came in a Styrofoam container with plastic utensils. Sanders's burger arrived on a real dinner plate with metal cutlery wrapped in a cloth napkin.

I could sense Sanders growing more comfortable. We began to talk about what he described as his "insatiable appetite to win," a competitiveness that he couldn't shut off.

"I gotta succeed," he said. "As long as they keep putting points on the scoreboard, I gotta win. You take the scoreboard down, I won't be like that. As long as it's up there, I gotta win."

For Sanders, things at Jackson State didn't always play out according to his standards. Meager funding left him disheartened. At times, the Tigers had been forced to practice at a local high school when weather soaked their field. "How in the world could an HBCU get less resources than a high school?" he asked between bites of his turkey burger. "We always talk about changing the culture. It's impossible to change the culture unless you change the people. It's not going to happen."

It was hard to square his clear passion for the program at Jackson State with the rumors that he was interviewing for other jobs. He said he never met with Auburn and Georgia Tech, and that Nebraska never reached out. He changed the subject before I could ask him about Colorado. I asked if he felt he had done enough at Jackson State—and whether his accomplishments had led him to think that he could have a greater impact at one of the big schools courting him.

"God always calls me to the need," he said. "God always calls me somewhere to satisfy needs." He added that if there wasn't a need there, those schools wouldn't be firing their coaches.

But, I wondered, how could his calling from God take him from a community in need like Jackson to a wealthy Power Five school? Was he worried about disappointing people?

Sanders didn't seem to like the line of questioning.

"I'm not living my life to please people," he said, sharply. "I'm living my life to please the Lord. If I seek to please men, I would not be a servant of God. A man or a woman ain't ever going to be pleased no matter what you do. It's always going to be something.

"Before you go make somebody happy, or your editor or whatever, *you* got to be happy. They can give you 10 raises. If you're an unhappy man, you're going to be an unhappy man with 10 raises. I got to be happy, man."

I asked, "What makes you happy?"

"If I'm pleasing God," Sanders said.

"How do you know when God is pleased?"

"I know when God is pleased. I know when God is pleased and I know when he's not pleased."

"Yeah? How?"

"Well, it's hard to tell another man how, because it may be different for you than it is for me," he said with a sigh.

"So you feel it."

"Yes."

"What does that *feel* like to you?"

"It's peace and serenity. I don't have bad days, man. I don't have bad days. I may have a bad minute, a bad moment, but not a bad day. I never have a bad day."

Then Sanders sat up, leaned forward, and looked me in the eyes.

"God is so good," he said. "My life is so good and purposeful that I don't run out and think what to *do* or what to *say* or how to *be*.

"I don't run out of nothing," he added. "I'm full. It's like I'm an electric car, man. I don't need no gas. I'm straight."

■ ■ ■

A SATURDAY AFTERNOON in December. Mississippi Veterans Memorial Stadium, home of the Jackson State Tigers, hosts of the 2022 SWAC Championship against the Southern University Jaguars. Coach Prime's final home game.

Elderly alumni ambled through the stadium with canes. Hazy-eyed old-heads ogled women young enough to give them heart attacks. An older man in heavily distressed denim and a shirt that said "Mr. Po Up" stood near the main entrance to the stands. He sipped through an endless supply of Coors Lights and gave a fist bump to each person who passed. A cannon boomed after each touchdown, and those gathered in the stands—a sea of red, white, and navy—when they were particularly moved, erupted into the school song "I'm So Glad I Go to JSU."

The Tigers dominated, winning 43-24, to secure a second straight conference title. The crowd celebrated with little concern for the big gray clouds threatening rain overhead, or for the rumors leaked 24 hours earlier that Sanders was leaving Jackson to become Colorado's next football coach.

In fact, by the end of the game, more than a few fans sang along loudly and pointedly to "Keep On Rollin," by blues singer King George, a not-so-subtle reminder that the Jackson State community has a rich football tradition that exists for them beyond mainstream expectations:

If you wanna go, baby
Go ahead and walk out the door
But one thing that you gotta remember
Is one monkey don't stop no show.

Most were supportive and appreciative, however. As people left the stadium, I heard one woman say, "The man has been here, what, three years? He can't be here forever!" One of her companions seemed to reluctantly agree: "You see his [fiancée]? She don't wanna be here!"

Patricia Whitfield has sold her own baked goods outside of Jackson State games for the past few years. She told me she was praying for Coach. "I know he didn't come to stay, but for the season, whatever season it is that God had for him," she said. "I pray for Deion that he stays humble, that he doesn't allow pride to get in his door, and that he will stand still and see the salvation of the Lord."

It was fair enough that Sanders was moving on. "Elevating," as he put it. Still, it seemed he went out of his way to make a show of the transition. That's characteristic of Deion Sanders, however. He's never held his tongue, is always looking for his next big stage, and specializes in two things: performance and spectacle.

I called Sanders the Monday after his big announcement. He picked up the phone during a break from a commercial shoot uncharacteristically chipper. There was a lightness to him, as if a burden had been lifted.

What did you tell your kids at Jackson? I asked.

"I told them, this is what it is," he said. "I'm very transparent. I'm very honest. I talk to my kids like they're men and I don't sugarcoat nothin'. This is what it is. This is why, and this is what it's going to be."

Everything else, Sanders said, is about elevation and putting himself in a position to win. Sanders then repeated what has become his new mantra: "It's one of the two, man. Elevation or termination, one of the two. That's the life of a coach.

"I do know when I'm called to be David and kill the giant, sooner or later the people are going to turn it around and you're going to be the giant, and they're going to act as David," he added. "You can't win."

That's not a "Jackson thing," he assured me, but something that comes with dreaming big. Sometimes, elevation means you gotta leave who you were behind.

"If you stop dreaming, then you won't understand," he said. "But if you are a dreamer and a go-getter and someone who strives to get to the next level? You understand."

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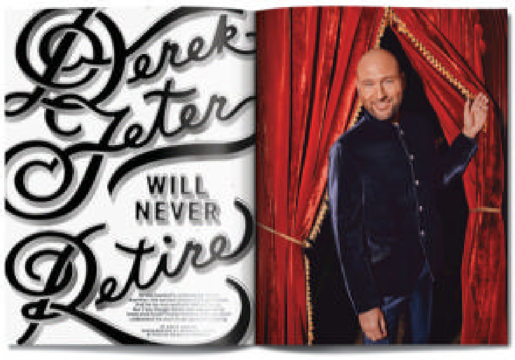

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Part of the care that he takes to limit what he says stems from a somewhat unexpected horror of being labeled cocky or arrogant. He brings it up repeatedly: Self-confidence is good, in this construction; self-*involvement* is just another kind of weakness. "I get irritated with people that talk about themselves all the time," he says. "Some players need to do it. Great. I hope they do well. But I just wouldn't choose to hang out with them in my spare time. You do need to have inner belief. You don't need to talk about it."

In all of this, there is the distinct sense that retirement, traumatic for so many athletes, has changed very little in Jeter. He insists that his various business interests, which also include the virtual trading card marketplace Arena Club, are enough to scratch his competitive itch. "Sure, it's not playing in front of 50,000 people, but it's still finding a way to compete, setting goals, building teams. It's the same thing," he says. In Philadelphia, I'd asked if part of him wished he was on the field that night. His response had been instantaneous.

"Playing?! No!" he'd said, almost sounding surprised. "Maybe for the first few years if I could have woken up and played in the World Series, I would have. But I played 20 years! There hasn't been a day I've missed playing the game."

He does say that he regrets not taking more pleasure in his career while it was unfolding. "I was never really able to enjoy the journey, because it was always, What's next? What's next?" He still does not wear any of his World Series rings, because to do so would suggest some kind of fatal complacency.

Still, he doesn't appear to connect that regret to any problem with intense competitiveness itself. Winning is, after all, the Jeter brand. I ask if anything since leaving the game has given him reason to revisit this absolute faith in the importance of victory. Does he still believe the axiom he was famous for as a Yankee? That anything less than a championship each year is an unmitigated failure?

"It is!" he says, definitively, before I can even finish the question.

I tell him that has always struck me as a little crazy. Aren't there a million small victories to be proud of along the way? Isn't, say, winning three out of seven games of a World Series pretty good? Don't the other guys get to be good once in a while?

"Do you want to expect yourself to lose? Be content with mediocrity?" he asks. "No, it's a failure. As an athlete, you only have so many years."

We order coffee. Jeter glances at his phone for the first time. A late-season hurricane knocked out power to his Miami home, and he's checking to see that it's come back on. When he turns back, his position has softened a bit. "Being successful is winning. Being happy is winning," he says. "I want to be happy."

■ ■ ■

THERE'S A TENDENCY to imagine Jeter as part of some gentlemanly old-school baseball past, but he is no nostalgist. He tells me that he believes in the necessity for many of the changes that Major League Baseball will institute this coming season to speed things up and inspire more offensive dynamism.

"You need to increase the action. It's not how long the games are, it's that you sit there for 20 minutes before the ball is in play," he says. He especially hates the shift, which will be banned in 2023. As a contact hitter who prided himself on doing whatever it took to win, doesn't he think hitters should have neutralized the shift themselves, by adjusting their approach?

"Hitters don't get *paid* to do that," he says. "Start giving huge contracts to guys who hit singles the other way, and they'll learn to do it."

There have been rumors about Jeter joining the Yankees broadcast team, but watching him on the Fox set—where the antics included David Ortiz throwing around fistfuls of money from a gold suitcase as part of a Fox sweepstakes promotion—it's difficult to imagine him joining that kind of scrum. It would be like a president going back to the Senate.

As early as 2010, Jeter had an immediate answer to what he wanted his second act to be: owning a baseball team. By all accounts, he was a committed and imaginative CEO of the Marlins, the first and still only Black person to hold the position on a major league team. One of his first moves was to take every member of the front office into the clubhouse to introduce themselves to the players and explain what they did. He hired Kimb Ng as the first female general manager in the major leagues. He took Spanish lessons to better communicate with the Latin American players. The Marlins made the playoffs once during his tenure, but there was a general sense that principal owner Bruce Sherman was not sufficiently committed to spending enough to field a consistent winner.

"I liked it. It was a chance to learn another side of the business," says Jeter. "It takes time. That's one thing: learning to have patience. I mean, I don't have patience. It's tough. Really tough. You want things to happen right away, and they don't happen right away. That can be frustrating."

The one thing close to a concrete answer the guy with the mango beer got out of him was about moving back to New York. "I don't like cold weather," Jeter told him. "At the beginning of my career, I didn't get to choose where to live. Now I get to choose." Later, he tells me he meant that he wouldn't uproot his family so soon after they moved from Tampa to Miami. "My wife would kill me," he says of relocating again.

When we were in Philly, as we sat in the greenroom of the Fox production trailer before his television appearance, Jeter jumped on FaceTime to say good night to his kids. There was some bedtime negotiation. Moving to the makeup chair, he chatted with the makeup artist about her grown daughter.

"Tell me it gets easier," Jeter said

"All we can do is be present," she told him sagely.

That part he gets. When he was with the Marlins, Jeter would leave work every night at 5:30 p.m. for dinner with the family before heading back to the stadium for home games. He's still figuring other parts out, like sleep. Jeter was once a champion sleeper. He gloried in it. Back in his playing days, when he worked nights, he would get home after a game, let the adrenaline wear off, and head to bed around 2 a.m. He'd wake to an alarm at 9 a.m., eat breakfast, and then go back to bed, setting another alarm for 1 p.m., when it was time to head to the park. "I would just sleep all day long," he says.

Now he goes to bed early, knowing he'll be up throughout the night. The girls sleep fine; the problem is him. "I hear absolutely everything. And when I hear something, I can't go back to sleep," he says. "Sometimes I dream about them doing something and I wake up, walk down the hall, check the cameras. Try to listen."

Jeter worries about the kids' adjustment to school after COVID. "We were overly careful during the pandemic. We didn't go anywhere. And if anyone came to our house, we would say, 'Stay away from the people.' So then we got back into going to school, and they're crying. We're like, 'What are you crying for?' 'The people!' " He smacks his forehead. "You spend all this time telling them to stay away from people, and then you're dropping them off with strangers. You don't even think about those things.... I've always said, 'Being unprepared is my biggest fear in life,' " he says. "But you can't prepare for this. You think you can, but you can't. You've just got to sort of figure it out on the way."

There is a difference in Jeter when he tells these stories about parenthood—the arena where "winning," or even knowing at any given moment what that might look like, is at its most elusive. "I'm not even saying this for your story," he tells me, a tacit acknowledgment of how on-script he usually stays. "I'm not trying to paint a picture that's not there." It's the rarest moment of hesitation, as though, for once, he hasn't yet performed his customary exercise of thinking through exactly how to present himself or how it will sound. I ask whether parenthood has made him reconsider anything about how he was raised. Famously, Charles Jeter never let his son triumph at any game they played, even when he was very little. Would Jeter let his daughters win? Whatever uncertainty he's allowed himself to show vanishes.

"Let them win?!" he says, laughing. "Not a chance. You don't ever want your kids to think that achieving something is easy. People say winning feels good, but why does it feel good? Because it's hard!"

He's back. And would we want it any other way? Now and forever. *Der-ek Je-ter.* ■

BRETT MARTIN *is a* GQ *correspondent.*

NOW STREAMING ON NETFLIX
GOLF'S EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 63

contractors and must market themselves, is rather low compared to the other professional leagues. Justin Thomas, a two-time major winner, explained the dynamic succinctly when I caught him in the players' lunch room at East Lake: "Even if you're a top player, unless you're, like, Tiger, no one truly knows who you are."

These big, swirling questions—about fame and money and image making—were cast into starker relief by the arrival of LIV. With their cameras following defectors like Koepka, Dustin Johnson, and Ian Poulter, the producers felt they were able to capture the emotional depth of the conflict in a way that surprised Mumm. "The existential crisis for the game is real," he said. Golfers spent all year whispering about which of their peers were taking the LIV money. "It's more personal than maybe you would think."

Unquestionably, the game's crisis was a godsend for producers looking for drama, Martin explained. "Listen, if I was being cynical, I would say it was a dream for the series because it gave real stakes and real dilemma to some of these characters," he said. "It's been kind of story dynamite for us."

* * *

A WEEK AFTER the tournament in Atlanta, Martin and Gay-Rees ambled into the *Full Swing* office in New York and soon fell into a conversation about the show's Rory McIlroy story line. McIlroy, who is perhaps the game's foremost non-Tiger star, spent last season using that stature to trash LIV at every opportunity.

The team had been whittling their mountain of footage, and a pair of producers were especially focused on refining the show's presentation of McIlroy. Noting the golfer's Northern Irish heritage, one of them wondered aloud whether they might work the Troubles into the show's narrative. "Coming from a world in which choices have consequences and lines are sort of being drawn in the sand," he put it, perhaps McIlroy's biography could be linked to his fierce advocacy for the Tour.

Gay-Rees was deferential. "If you want to have a crack at it and if you think it can be laid in subtly and tastefully, and it feels like it's legitimate, organic—fine. If it feels tricky, then don't worry about it." Martin was blunter: "I mean, the subtext of PGA versus LIV is IRA versus…." The table laughed. "It's a stretch."

Exactly what the battle between the PGA and LIV *is* comparable to remains tough to tell. As the show neared its airdate, the two sides were still trading lawsuits sure to require years of deliberation. Whether LIV players would be able to compete in majors remained an open question—one to be taken up, perhaps, on a second season of *Full Swing*. (Mumm is also excited about the idea of diving into a schism of a different kind: this year's Ryder Cup, which pits a team of Americans against one of Europeans.)

> "It gave real stakes and **real dilemma to some of the characters,"** Paul Martin said of the battle between the PGA and LIV Golf. "It's been kind of story dynamite for us."

In New York, season one was locking into place. On the day I visited the offices, Mumm shared that Netflix suits who had previewed a few episodes requested that the show not open—as was then the plan—with a forlorn Brooks Koepka, who seemed simply too sad to kick off the series.

But moments of happy surprise abounded. Mumm showed me a portion of the golfer Matt Fitzpatrick's story line, which represented one of the lucky accidents that any show needs if it wants to stand out in the streaming glut.

Fitzpatrick is a British golfer whose nerdy vibe does not suggest alpha competitor. But then, in June, Fitzpatrick won the US Open in a way that not even Mumm, Martin, and Gay-Rees would have dreamed of scripting. Holding a one-shot lead heading into the final hole at the Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts, one of the most storied sites in US Open history, he sailed his tee shot into a fairway bunker. And then he daringly took aim at the hole and striped a nine iron out of the sand and onto the green. He putted twice and took the trophy.

I watched it all play out in the editing room in agonizing slow motion. Fitzpatrick's miss off the tee. His parents and brother watching from behind the ropes and chattering nervously. His walk to the green soundtracked, triumphant, by a bleating Bon Iver song. I'd seen the shot live on TV months earlier and in countless replays in the days after. I knew exactly what was going to happen. It still ruled. "Everyone's like, 'We know how it ends,'" Mumm told me in the room. "I've watched that 50 times and it still gets me every time."

That the footage seemed yanked from a sports movie was sort of the point. "People always try to tell the sports version of these stories, and we are always like, no, no, no," Paul Martin told me. "Obviously, you have to be faithful to the sport, but you're telling the movie version of these stories. It's not enough that Matthew Fitzpatrick turned up and won the US Open. It's really: How do we establish Matthew as a character so that in our show, when he gets to that 18th hole, when he hits it in the bunker, and then he hits that shot onto the green, our audience…." He trailed off. "It needs to feel like *Rocky*."

Of course, to get the footage necessary to build the full Fitzpatrick story meant training cameras on him long before his moment of glory. The crew began following Fitzpatrick in March, at the Players Championship in Florida. "To have Netflix there was kind of weird, because you just don't want any distractions or anything," he told me. "But it was almost good to have the distractions of thinking about that, rather than thinking about the golf the next day."

And so, when they asked to embed with him again before the US Open, he was game. Even if he was still a long shot. So much so that cameras captured the moment when a tournament security guard asked if he was a player or a caddy. When we spoke, he was wry and understated about the whole thing. "I would assume," Fitzpatrick told me of his time being filmed, "they got a lot of good content."

SAM SCHUBE *is the director of* GQ SPORTS.

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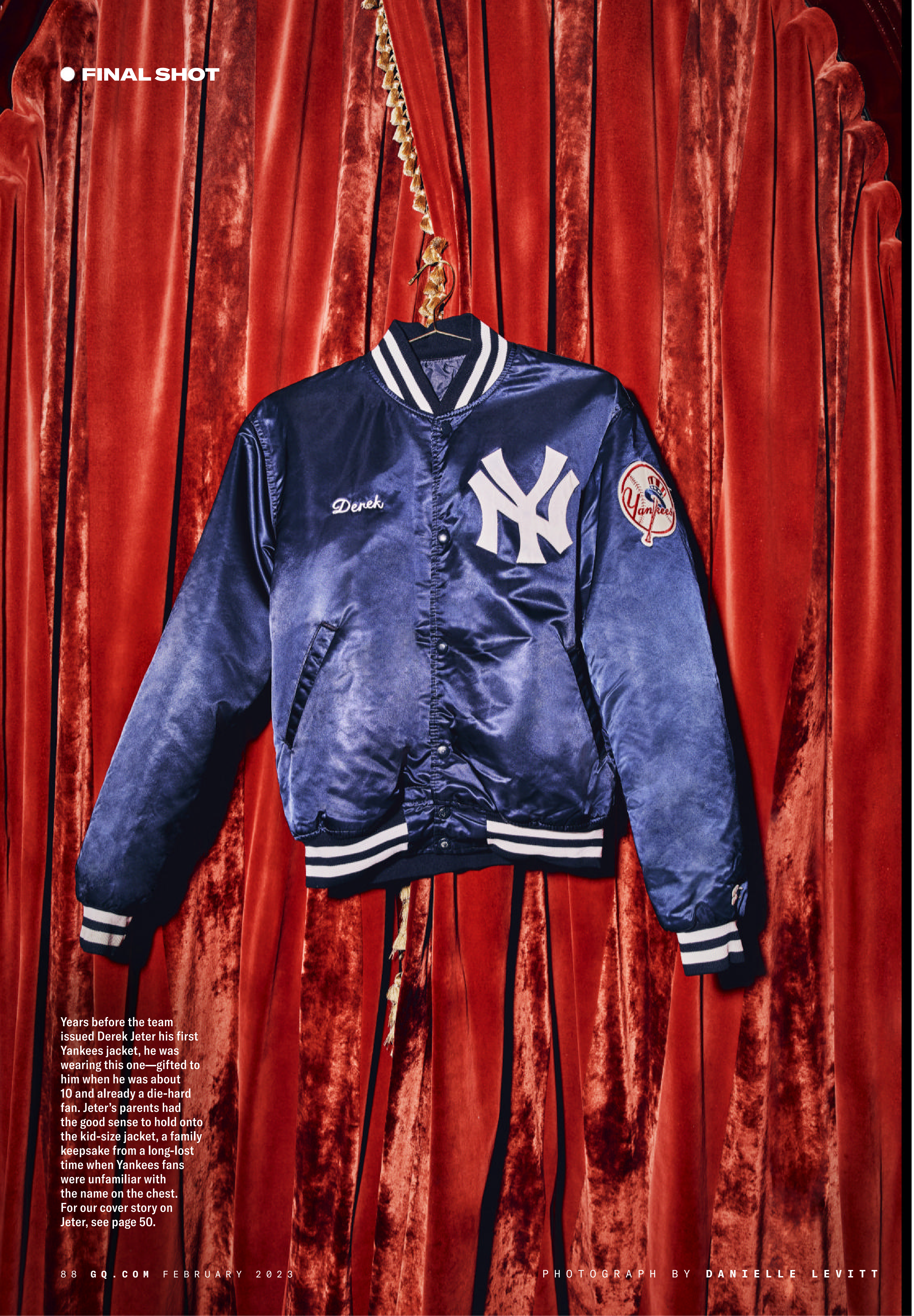
FINAL SHOT



Years before the team issued Derek Jeter his first Yankees jacket, he was wearing this one—gifted to him when he was about 10 and already a die-hard fan. Jeter's parents had the good sense to hold onto the kid-size jacket, a family keepsake from a long-lost time when Yankees fans were unfamiliar with the name on the chest. For our cover story on Jeter, see page 50.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **DANIELLE LEVITT**

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